

ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: "TAKE WRITING": NEWS, INFORMATION,
AND DOCUMENTARY CULTURE IN LATE
MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

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This dissertation analyzes late medieval English texts in order to understand how they respond to the anxieties of a society experiencing the growing passion for news and the development of documentary culture. The author's reading of the Paston letters, Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, and the Digby *Mary Magdalene* demonstrate these texts' common emergence in an environment preoccupied with the production and reception of documents. The discussion pays particular attention to actual and fictional letters in these texts since the intersection of two cultural forces finds expression in the proliferation of letters. As a written method of conveying and storing public information, the letters examined in this dissertation take on importance as documents. The author argues that the letters question the status of writing destabilized by the contemporary abuse of written documents. The dissertation offers a view of late medieval documentary culture in connection with early modern print culture and the growth of public media.

The Introduction examines contemporary historical records and documents as a social context for the production of late medieval texts. Chapter 1 demonstrates that

transmitting information about current affairs is one of the major concerns of the Pastons. The chapter argues that late medieval personal letters show an investment in documentary culture and prepared for the burgeoning of the bourgeois reading public. Whereas Chapter 1 discusses “real” letters, Chapter 2 and 3 focus on fictional letters. Comparing Donegild’s counterfeit letters in *The Man of Law’s Tale* and the Duke of Gloucester’s confession (1391), Chapter 2 discusses the impact of documentary culture on the characterization of the narrator. The chapter argues that *The Man of Law’s Tale* communicates Chaucer’s reservations about the reliability of written documents. Chapter 3 explores medieval dramatic representation of ideological resistance to documentary culture and the government’s dependence on textual authority. Focusing on the problem of disinformation in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, the chapter discusses how developments in late medieval documentary culture are mobilized to demonstrate that the visual dimensions of theater give access to spiritual truths with a kind of immediacy, which the written document cannot provide.

“TAKE WRITING”: NEWS, INFORMATION, AND DOCUMENTARY CULTURE
IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

by

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INTRODUCTION: *Domus Dedaly*

News and Writing in Late Medieval England

New rais'd Seditioun, secret Whisperings
Of unknown Authors, and of doubtful things.
All done in Heaven, Earth, Ocean, Fame survies;
And through the ample world inquires of news.

-- *Metamorphosis* xii. 44-63 --

In *The House of Fame* Chaucer describes the House of Rumor as the “Domus Dedaly” (1920) full of “tydynges.”¹ Led by an eagle, Geoffrey the narrator arrives at this marvelous place to hear “some newe tydynges” (1886) and find new sources of poetic inspiration. Baffled by its restless and chaotic condition, however, the narrator scarcely finds even a “fote-brede of space” (2042) in the fast-whirling, cage-like structure where a multitude of people are whispering in one another’s ear “a newe tydyng prively, / Or elles [talking] al openly” (2045-6):

And over alle the houses angles
Ys ful of rounynges and of jangles
Of werres, of pes, of mariages,
Of reste, of labour, of viages,
Of abood, of deeth, of lyf,
Of love, of hate, accord, or stryf,
...
Of good or mys government,

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The House of Fame in Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson et al., 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), lines 1920 and 1957. Subsequent line citations in the text refer to this edition.

Of fyr, and of dyvers accident. (1959-1964, 1975-76)

In the House of Rumor, people are engaged in exchanging news, eagerly asking if somebody knows the latest news and gladly imparting their own. As Willi Erzgraber notes, Chaucer's list of their tidings – war and peace, death and life, pestilence, trade, and politics – reminds us of a “modern newspaper” that covers events from all over the world;² Geoffrey observes that nobody on earth has the “kunynge” (2056) to describe all the things that he has heard in the House of Rumor. The information circulating in this place, however, is not always reliable: “Whan oon had herd a thing, ywis, / He com forth right to another wight, / And gan him tellen anon-ryght / The same that to him was told, / Or hyt a forlong way was old, / But gan somewhat for to eche / To this tydyng in this speche / More than hit ever was” (2060-7). Not only does news spread instantaneously; it also undergoes a process of continual intensification and distortion. Chaucer expresses his particular doubt about the falsified news while describing a company of people whom Geoffrey meets in the House of Rumor: the shipmen, pilgrims, pardoners, and messengers. According to David Wallace, these groups represented excellent sources of news and information during the late Middle Ages.³ But Chaucer's references to these people's bags full of “lesinges, / entremedled with tydynges” (2123-4) and the containers “crammed ful of lyes” (2129) suggest the unreliability of the news they deliver. Truth and

² Willi Erzgraber, “Problems of Oral and Written Transmission as Reflected in Chaucer's *House of Fame*,” *Historical and Editorial Studies in Medieval and Early Modern English for Johan Gerristen*, ed. Mary-Jo Arn and Hanneke Wirtjes / with Hans Jansen (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1985), 113; according to Erzgraber, the Middle English word “tidings” means both “events” and the “reports of the events”; etymologically, it corresponds to the German *Zeitungen*, newspaper.

³ David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 186.

falsehood are inseparably intertwined in the ever-spreading news, whose power is compared to that of a fire, which starts from a “sparke” (2079) but ends up burning a city.

Scholars have considered *The House of Fame* as a “vindication of poetry,” in which Chaucer explores poetic responsibility and the sources of his knowledge, presenting himself as a “seeker after fresh poetic inspiration, new poetic ‘tidings.’”⁴ Piero Boitani particularly points to the similarity between this poem and *The Divine Comedy*, emphasizing how Chaucer considers himself the heir of the ancient authors and seeks to follow Dante. A. J. Minnis challenges Boitani’s view, however, asserting that the air of humor pervading Chaucer’s “gossip-filled dwellings of rumor and dubious reportage” exhibits no obvious desire to emulate the great author.⁵ In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante pursues an elevated, tragic style fit for his great poetic matters; in *The House of Fame*, Chaucer presents a narrator lacking in confidence, expressing his skepticism about absolute truth.

Chaucer’s House of Rumor shows, however, that significant parts of its representation draw on aspects of fourteenth-century English society in which lies, rumor, and all sorts of fabrications proliferated. In Book I of *The House of Fame*, the eagle explains to Geoffrey that the purpose of their journey is to explore the real world of experience:

⁴ J. A. W. Bennett, *Chaucer’s Book of Fame: An Exposition of The House of Fame* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 3. Jesse M. Gellrich also views this poem as Chaucer’s exploration of poetry and development of “an ars poetica of his own”; see *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 169. See also Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1984), 189; and A. J. Minnis, V. J. Scattergood, and J. J. Smith, *The Shorter Poems: Oxford Guide to Chaucer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 167.

⁵ Minnis, *The Shorter Poems*, 161-7.

“thou hast no tydynges
Of Loves folk yf they be glade,
Ne of noght elles that God made;
And noght oonly fro fer contree
That ther no tydyng cometh to thee,
But of thy verray neyghebores,
That duellen almost at thy dores,
Thou herist neyther that ne this.” (644-651)

The “tidings” that Geoffrey has to hear from his journey to the House of Rumor are those of his “verray neyghebores” and the society to which he belongs. The exigency of Geoffrey’s expedition explains why Chaucer locates the House of Rumor not in “heavenly regions of immutable truth and total certainty” but in a valley standing midway between the heaven, earth, and sea, where every sound coming from the earth can be heard.⁶ The narrator’s journey to the House of Rumor is ultimately a journey to a contemporary England where the circulation of news and information had emerged as an important social and political issue. J. A. W. Bennett compares the house of Fame to a “royal broadcasting station” and the House of Rumor to a “kind of office for miscellaneous business.”⁷ Though brief, Bennet’s reading correctly points to this poem’s investment in contemporary society, specifically its hunger for news.

I begin this dissertation with a discussion of *The House of Fame* since the house full of “rounynges and of jangles” (1960) serves as a symbolic representation of the society in which late medieval literary and historical texts were produced. According to George Sayles, “by the thirteenth century, England was a busy country with a remarkable criss-cross of professional messengers traveling regularly between London ... and local

⁶ Minnis uses this expression in order to emphasize the difference between Chaucer and Dante. See *The Shorter Poems*, 166.

⁷ Bennett, *Chaucer’s Book of Fame*, 122.

regions.”⁸ Historical records of late medieval England attest to a growing hunger for news and information. From the 1320s, with the reign of Edward III, parliamentary decisions came to be announced regularly because repeated wars presented English governments with the task of raising money. Monarchs used the channels of public communication in order to proclaim victories and explain away defeats. The government ordered sheriffs to publish these announcements in many places by posting and reading them on market days. At church, county court, market place, even tavern and public highway, news came in wherever people congregated, creating social interest in the receipt of information throughout the realm.⁹

Frequent appearances of the word “tidings” in late medieval English literary and historical texts, specifically romances, royal documents, court records, and chronicles, bear witness to an enormous passion for news in contemporary society. Yet few scholars have noted the social implications of the word.¹⁰ For instance, *The Sultan of Babylon*, a

⁸ George Sayles, *The King's Parliament of England* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 72.

⁹ For late medieval interest in news, see J. R. Maddicott, “The County Community and the Making of Public Opinion in Fourteenth-Century England,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 28 (1978): 27-43; Maddicott, “Parliament and Constituencies, 1272-1377,” *English Parliament in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. G. Davies and J. H. Denton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 83-4; James Masschaele, “The Public Space of the Marketplace in Medieval England,” *Speculum* 77 (2002): 390-399; Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1994), 58; and Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 22-24.

¹⁰ Chaucerians have briefly noted literary implications of the Middle English word “tidings”; see David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*; Donald Howard, *Writers and Pilgrims: Medieval Pilgrimage Narratives and Their Posterity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 100-2; Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame*, 178; and Erzgraber, “Problems of Oral and Written Transmission,” 113. According to Wallace, more specific than “talk” but more broad than “novella,” the word “tidings” can refer to a wide range of phenomena, such as news, information, rumor, story, and letters. Wallace, Howard, and Bennett explain Chaucer's interest in “tidings” as an attempt to find new material for his poesy. See also Karma Lochrie's discussion of *The House of Fame* in *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 80-92. Lochrie develops her reading based on the definition of the word “tidings” as gossip. For a scholarly effort to find contemporary political references in the “tidings” of *The House of Fame*, see Larry D. Benson, “The ‘Love-Tydynges in Chaucer's *House of Fame*,” *Chaucer's Dream Visions and Shorter Poems*, ed. William A. Quinn (New York: Garland, 1999), 221-41.

late-fourteenth or early-fifteenth-century romance, features constant exchanges of “tidings” throughout the narrative.¹¹ This story of a feud between Charlemagne and Laban, the sultan of Babylon, begins with the “tidinges newe” (65) that Laban hears from mercenaries. Informed how the mercenaries’ warship drifted to Rome and how the Romans killed his people and plundered precious furs and spices offered to him, Laban resolves to retaliate on the Christians. He sends messengers to all his allies in Asia and Africa; spies are dispatched to collect “tidings” of foreign countries; letters are sent to foes and friends for political negotiations. The motif of “tidings” plays an important role in the development of the narrative, as well; the arrival of messengers often signals a change of episodes in *The Sultan of Babylon*.¹² Frequent references to “tidings,” “messengers,” and “letters” in this late medieval literary text mirror the conspicuous growth of social communication in this period.¹³

My aim in this dissertation is to historicize certain late medieval texts in order to understand how they respond to the problems and anxieties of a society experiencing the growing need for news and undergoing the development of documentary culture.

According to Michael Clanchy, England between 1066 and 1307 was marked by a shift

¹¹ *The Sultan of Babylon in Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances*, ed. Alan Lupack, TEAMS (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 1990), 7-103. *The Sultan of Babylon* is one of many medieval tales dealing with the exploits of Charlemagne and his band of retainers known as the Twelve Peers.

¹² For examples, the episode in which Charlemagne determines to join the war between Laban and the Pope begins with a report conveying the defeat of the Pope in the battle against Laban: “Now telle we of the messangere, / That wente to Charlemayne, / Certyfyinge him by letters dere, / Howe the Romaynes were slayne, / And howe the contrey brente was / Unto the gate of Rome, / And howe the people song ‘Alas,’ / Tille socoure from him come” (*The Sultan of Babylon*, 575-598). See also lines 308, 360, 383 and 783.

¹³ For increased social interest in news since the beginning of the Hundred Years War, see Kenneth Folwer, “News from the Front: Letters and Despatches of the Fourteenth Century,” *The Hundred Years War*, ed. K. Fowler (London: Macmillan; St. Martin’s Press, 1971), 63-92. See also Maddicott, “Parliament and Constituencies, 1272-1377,” 61-87.

from “habitually memorizing things to writing them down and keeping records.”¹⁴ The increasing use of documents for legal, bureaucratic, and business purposes promoted the growth of a literate mentality, which gradually took root in diverse social groups and areas of activity. My investigation of this social transition from “memory to written record” pays special attention to the impact of documentary culture on the late medieval circulation of news.

The Middle English texts discussed in my dissertation have never been read in connection with documentary culture. My readings of the Paston letters, Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*, and the Digby *Mary Magdalene* demonstrate these texts’ common emergence in an environment preoccupied with the production and reception of documents. Interestingly, these texts are connected to each other by two themes: the law and the letter. The Paston letters are actual letters written by a fifteenth-century Norfolk family of lawyers. Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale* is a popular medieval story of a wronged queen, narrated by a lawyer. The fictional letters featured in *The Man of Law’s Tale* are crucial for understanding how Chaucer’s works represented and responded to documentary culture. The Digby *Mary Magdalene* also features a number of jurists who are involved with the production and distribution of letters. Clanchy argues that the increased use of documents is closely related to the establishment of the English legal system and the growth of bureaucracy.¹⁵ Green has also noted that the influence of documentary culture is most visible in changes of legal concepts.¹⁶ A study of the

¹⁴ Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 3.

¹⁵ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 2-3.

¹⁶ Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 10-19.

intersection between the development of documentary culture and the appetite for news inevitably involves texts that demonstrate legal and epistolary connections.

In particular, my dissertation analyzes late medieval actual and fictional English letters because the intersection of two cultural forces – the growth of literacy and the social interest in news—finds expression in the proliferation of letters.¹⁷ Thousands of letters were written and collected from the mid-fourteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries; about four hundred letter-collections were published by 1580.¹⁸ Remarkable in the practice of letter-writing in late medieval England is the emergence of the personal letter as a familiar means of social and political communication. Both C. L. Kingsford and Giles Constable classify medieval letters into personal and official, although they both agree that the line of demarcation between these types is not always clear.¹⁹ Apart from formal state papers and intimate personal letters, numerous private individuals wrote letters similar to public documents in order to convey opinions and report information. Fifteenth-century English letters, such as the Cely and Paston letters, show that private letters were increasingly concerned with public affairs.²⁰ Contemporary chronicles and court records have also preserved a number of anonymous bills and letters of semi-public character, showing that the practice of using written words for social communication was

¹⁷ According to Martin Camargo, interest in letter writing was particularly high in England during the first half of the fifteenth century; see *The Middle English Verse Love Epistle* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1991), 132.

¹⁸ Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1976), 39.

¹⁹ C. L. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1963), 194 and 211. Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*, 22-23.

²⁰ For a complete list of late medieval private letters dealing with public affairs, see Kingsford, *English Historical Literature*, 211-227.

not confined to religious and political authorities; it was handed down the social hierarchy and even adopted by common people.

As a written method of conveying and storing public information, the late medieval letters I examine in my dissertation all take on importance as documents. Emily Steiner defines the medieval document as a “material object, written on parchment, sealed with wax, carried in sleeves, displayed to witnesses, and stored in the chests” and archives.²¹ Emaphsizing brevity and “citability” as the most important characteristics of the document, Steiner defines its meaning as narrowly as possible. My conception of the medieval document is more broad and inclusive than Steiner’s. By document, I mean a written text that records and preserves official and public dealings: a text that “enacts something and gets something done.”²² My discussion covers diverse forms of “intrumental writing,” such as rebels’ letters, bills, libels, royal proclamations and writs, and even personal correspondence. These documents, written in epistolary form, played a key role in the transmission of public information, thereby promoting people’s interest in social and political issues. The spread of these documents also contributed to the growth of a literate mentality by making the written text familiar to every social stratum. The remainder of this introduction examines contemporary historical records and documents in order to understand the significance of documentary culture and the social appetite for news in the production of late medieval texts. The reconstruction of a textual

²¹ Emily Steiner, *Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.

²² Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 116. See also Justice (117) for the notion of the document as “intrumental writing.” Justice states that the bureaucratic culture of intrumental writing, rather than Langland’s exegetical and literary composition, had influence on the production of John Ball’s letter during the English Rising of 1381.

environment throws new light on our understanding of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English society and literary culture.

Contemporary historical documents offer the clearest evidence attesting to the appetite for news in late medieval England. For instance, the case of John Shirle from Nottinghamshire, recorded in the Cambridge inquisitions into the Rising of 1381, demonstrates the ways in which people exchanged political information:

he (John Shirle) said in a tavern in Bridge Street in Cambridge, where many were assembled to listen to his news and worthless talk, that the stewards of the lord the king as well as the justices and many other officers and ministers of the king were more deserving to be drawn and hanged and to suffer other lawful pains and torments than John Ball, chaplain, a traitor and felon lawfully convicted.²³

This record of 16 July 1381 is suggestive in several ways. First, John Shirle and the commons of Cambridge knew about John Ball's execution (12 July 1381), only four days after the trial at St. Albans in Hertfordshire. The speed with which news traveled in John Shirle's case shows how acutely people craved information about current national affairs. Moreover, the record describes John Shirle as a "vagabond" who "carried" lies and news in an attempt to draw together diverse local communities in a united political opposition. Ferster argues that politics was an important factor that stirred appetite for news in late medieval England.²⁴ The dissemination of public news by a "wandering peasant"

²³ For the document concerning John Shirle's case, see *The Peasant's Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London and Basingstoke, UK: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1983) xxviii-ix. For a detailed discussion of this case, see Ralph Hanna III, "Pilate's Voice / Shirley's Case," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94 (1992): 793-812. Justice also briefly mentions the case of John Shirle in *Writing and Rebellion*, n. 58. I rely on Dobson for the translation of this passage, originally written in Latin.

²⁴ Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, 24.

suggests the growth of political consciousness among common people.²⁵ It also shows that the desire to know current social affairs and gather news from other parts of the country was not exclusive to the educated and privileged.

Second, the record shows that public places such as alehouses played an important role in the exchange of political information and opinions. According to Jacques Le Goff, medieval taverns functioned as a nodal point for networking. News of foreign events, legends, and myths all circulated from the tavern, and the conversations held there formed men's views of the world.²⁶ Minstrels recited verses and ballads in alehouses and other places where people congregated and consequently heightened the political consciousness of common people. Historical records of Lollardy also show many cases in which taverns were employed to disseminate heretical ideas and tidings. For instance, in 1413 William Tryvet of Goscote near Leicester was accused of going to the taverns and teaching the gospel instead of going to church on Sundays; William Ramsbury, a layman, was known to frequent the taverns of Wiltshire, Berkshire, and Dorset, preaching and celebrating an attenuated form of mass.²⁷

Most important, the narrative of the report reveals the authorities' concerns about what Hanna calls John Shirle's "unlicensed verbal activity" and its potential for sedition.²⁸ Paul Strohm asserts that in late medieval England, circulation of information,

²⁵ For the identification of John Shire as a "wandering peasant," see Hanna, "Pilate's Voice / Shirley's Case," 797-98.

²⁶ Jacques Le Goff, *Medieval Civilization: 400-1500*, trans. Julia Barrow (London: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 313-14.

²⁷ Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 151-55.

²⁸ Hanna, "Pilate's Voice / Shirley's Case," 798.

the “chains of informal talk” among people, often caused deep anxiety for the government.²⁹ The jurors state that John Shirle was arrested and hanged for spreading “silly and worthless talk” throughout several counties, declaring the injustice of John Ball’s execution. The report dismisses John Shirle’s criticism of the government by repeating the word “worthless” three times, thereby emphasizing that his words were groundless and insignificant. John Shirle’s criticism, however, could not have been merely “worthless talk”; the jurors assert that John Shirle’s “silly” words were “damaging” since they broke the “peace of the lord of the king” and made the people “disquieted and disturbed.”³⁰ The jurors’ statement reveals the concerns of judicial authority about the insidious power of uncontrolled communication conducted among people.

The potential danger of “informal talk” is most clearly attested in the news about the death of Richard II, which continued to circulate more than two decades after his

²⁹ Paul Strohm, *England’s Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399-1422* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 25. Karma Lochrie defines rumor and gossip as a resistant oral discourse of a marginalized group and as an uncontrollable feminine form of communication; see *Covert Operations*, 56-92. But medieval gossip was neither marginal nor feminine. In the late Middle Ages men as well as women participated in gossiping, and rumor served as an essential source of information. Even written chronicles were often based on rumor. For instance, in 1348 Henry Knighton entered in his chronicle an account of strange ladies who had appeared at tournaments as if “a company of players, dressed in men’s clothes of striking richness and variety.” Knighton wrote that the troop of about “forty or sometimes fifty such damsels,” were all “eye-catching and beautiful, though hardly of the Kingdom’s better sort”; see *Knighton’s Chronicle: 1337-1396*, ed. and trans. G. H. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 92-95. But Knighton’s tale of the strange ladies at tournaments was only a rumor. Another example is found in *The Westminster Chronicle*, in which the author registered the fall of Rhodes to the Saracens and pagans in 1385. The report, based on the oral accounts of “some people,” was not true. The island of Rhodes were not captured by the Ottoman Turks until 1523; see *The Westminster Chronicle: 1381-1394*, ed. and trans. L. C. Hector and Barbar F. Harvey (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 122-23. For discussions of rumor, see also Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 6; and Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 134-139. Rumor plays an important role in Shakespeare’s *2 Henry IV*. For discussions of Rumor’s ubiquitous presence in this Shakespearean play, see Richard Knowles, “Unquiet and the Double Plot of *2 Henry IV*,” *Shakespeare Studies* 2 (1966): 133-40; Richard Abrams, “Rumor’s Reign in *2 Henry IV*: The Scope of a Personification,” *English Literary Renaissance* 16 (1986): 467-495; and Harry Berger, Jr., “Sneak’s Noise, or Rumor and Detextualization in *2 Henry IV*,” *Kenyon Review* 6 (1984): 58-78.

³⁰ Dobson, *The Peasant’s Revolt*, xxviii.

demise. After his deposition and death in 1399, the rumor that Richard was “alive and well in Scotland” began to spread, despite the public burial and display of his body.³¹ Although the Lancastrian government claimed that the king had died of natural causes, people did not believe its claim, particularly because Richard’s death happened right after a failed rebellion by his surviving followers in 1400.³² Supporters of the deposed king expressed their strong doubt about Richard’s death. In his “Metrical History,” Jean Creton writes that the great majority of those who spoke of the matter or heard it spoken could not believe him dead: the displayed body, he maintained, was that of Maudeleyn, Richard’s chaplain, whose “face, size, and height, and build were so exactly similar to the king’s.”³³ William Serle, an esquire of the former king’s chamber, also invented a story that Richard was “spirited away from Pontefract and given refuge in Scotland.”³⁴ Serle went to Scotland with a forged royal signet and affixed it to numerous counterfeit letters sent to Richard’s former intimates. After Serle’s capture and execution in 1404, the

³¹ For the public burial and display of Richard’s body by Henry V in an attempt to suppress the survival legend, see Strohm, *England’s Empty Throne*, 101-127.

³² See *Vita Ricardi Secundi*, quoted in Given-Wilson, ed. and trans., *Chronicles of the Revolution, 1397-1400: The Reign of Richard II* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 241-2: “[Richard] had placed all his trust in them [Richard’s supporters], hoping that through them and with their help he might be restored to his former eminence, but when he realized that his hopes had been thus dashed and there was now no chance of escaping, he declined into such grief, languor and weakness that he took to his bed and refused any food, drink or other sustenance. Thus on St. Valentine’s day, 14 February, in the year [1400], the twenty-third year of his reign, he died there in prison.” Although considering Richard’s death as retribution for his evildoings, the author of *Vita Ricardi Secundi* reveals his doubt about the cause of the king’s death. Drawing on an anonymous source, the author writes that Richard was “miserably put to death by starvation there.” Adam Usk’s account also expresses his confusion about the cause of Richard’s death: “When the former king Richard heard that those in whom he had placed his hopes of restoration were now dead, his suffering deepened, and he pined away even unto death, which came to him in the most wretched of circumstances in Pontefract castle, on the last day of February, tormented, bound with chains, and starved of food by Sir N. Swynford”; see *The Chronicle of Adam Usk 1377-1421*, ed. and trans. Chris Given-Wilson (Oxford: Oxford Medieval Texts, 1997), 90-1. Note that the date of Richard II’s death is different in *Vita Ricardi Secundi* and *The Chronicle of Adam Usk*.

³³ See Jean Creton, “Metrical History of the Deposition of King Richard the Second,” ed. and trans., J. Webb, *Archaeologia* 20 (1824): 217-41. For the quotation, I use Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 243-45.

³⁴ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 243-45.

rumors that Richard was alive began to subside. Still, in 1416, London hosteller Benedict Wolman was sentenced to be hanged because he conspired to bring Thomas Warde, whom Wolman declared to be the late King Richard II, from Scotland into England, with the view of placing him on the throne.³⁵ In 1417, the arrested Oldcastle refused to acknowledge Henry V's authority, maintaining that Richard II was still alive in Scotland.³⁶

Henry's position as a usurper made him peculiarly vulnerable to attack since he did not have a sound hereditary title. People who believed that the new regime would be an improvement began to dissent when they found no change in the political situation; as Peter McNiven suggests, dissatisfaction among the commons was mainly channeled into the Ricardian survival legend.³⁷ Charles Ross asserts that the danger of rumor, particularly in times of political unease and uncertainty, lay in the fact that "it was difficult to control and seditious in character."³⁸ During this period of political unease, seditious rumors, ballads, and prophesies proliferated, breeding discontent and disorder among people. These communications fueled numerous conspiracies and rebellions against the Lancastrian government. For instance, in November 1402 John Draycote at

³⁵ Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 106-10. See also Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 240-45. For a detailed discussion of the rumors concerning the deposition and death of Richard II, see Peter McNiven, "Rebellion, Sedition, and the Legend of Richard II's Survival in the Reigns of Henry IV and Henry V," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 76 (1994): 93-117.

³⁶ McNiven, "Richard II's Survival," 114.

³⁷ McNiven, "Richard II's Survival," 109.

³⁸ Ross, "Rumour, Propaganda, and Popular Opinion During the Wars of the Roses," *Patronage, The Crown, and the Provinces*, ed. R. A. Griffiths (Gloucester, UK / Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Alan Sutton/Humanities Press, 1981), 19. See also G. R. Elton, *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 6.

Coventry claimed that Sir John Curson of Essex and others had written to him, inviting him to rise to avenge Richard's murder.³⁹

The Lancastrian government's responses to the Ricardian survival legend attest to the seriousness of the rumor's impact on politics, as well as the credibility of orally transmitted information during the late Middle Ages. In order to contain the rumor, the Parliament of 1402 issued a proclamation against seditious preaching in taverns and other public places: "no wastrels, rhymers, minstrels, or vagabonds should be sustained in Wales, to make tumultuous gatherings among the common people, which by their divinations, lies, and excitations are the cause of the insurrection and rebellion occurring there now."⁴⁰ The government also sent messages to every county seeking the punishment of persons who had claimed Richard to be alive. Late medieval trial records and proclamations frequently exhibit governmental effort to control the transmission of false news.⁴¹

Conspicuous in the government's response to the Ricardian legend is the extensive use of writing, with which the Lancastrians could communicate their views widely and more efficiently. Propaganda was the natural resort of an insecure government whose representatives felt the need to correct what they considered falsehood

³⁹ McNiven, "Richard II's Survival," 97.

⁴⁰ Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 15.

⁴¹ See the proclamation of 1391 collected in *Memorials of London and London Life in the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries*, trans. and ed. by Henry Thomas Riley (London: Longmans Green, 1868), 520. The proclamation charges people who "speak, or give ... opinion, as to either Nicholas Brembre or John Norhamptone," Richard II's favorites persecuted by the Lord Appellants during the Merciless Parliament of 1388. The *Memorial of London* contains numerous records of punishment for spreading false reports, including slandering authorities with false information; see pages 423, 433, 454, 460, 479, and 507. Discussions of rumor circulating during the reign of Richard II and Henry IV are found in Strohm's *England's Empty Throne*, 23-24; and Carl Lindahl, *Ernest Games: Folkloric Patterns in the Canterbury Tales* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), Chapter 6.

and to communicate the government's "correct" views widely; most propaganda in this period was circulated in written form.⁴² As Strohm argues, the Lancastrians were aware of "the value of textualization, of the sense in which a written account placed in the right kind of circulation can generate its own kind of historical truth."⁴³ During the reigns of Henry IV and V, even official chronicles served as an efficient tool for propaganda. Records of traitorous plots, such as "threatened empoisonings and ambushes," were actively created and used by the Lancastrian kings since they found that narrative "invention and control of such plots" was so serviceable to the kingship.⁴⁴

Not only the government but also political protestors mobilized various modes of written communication in order to convey their opinions.⁴⁵ Particularly, studies of the Lollard movement during the late Middle Ages have long noted the role of written proclamations in the spread of heretical ideas.⁴⁶ Steven Justice claims that the proliferation of broadsides in Ricardian England is strongly linked with the rise of Lollardy; no record survives of a posted broadside before 1377, and except for the Gaunt libel, written during the conflict between John of Gaunt and the city of London, the earliest broadsides are all traceable to the activities of Wyclif and his followers in 1377.⁴⁷

⁴² See Ross, "Rumour, Propaganda, and Popular Opinion," 19-24; Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 1-31 and 63-100; and Maddicott, "Parliament and the Constituencies, 1272-1377," 81-82.

⁴³ Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 82.

⁴⁴ Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 63-65.

⁴⁵ Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, 22-24; Ross, "Rumour, Propaganda, and Popular Opinion," 15; and Wendy Scase, "'Strange and Wonderful Bills': Bill-Casting and Political Discourse in Late Medieval England," *New Medieval Literatures* 2, ed. Rita Copeland, David Lawton, and Wendy Scase (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 226.

⁴⁶ For various modes of written communication mobilized during the Lollard movement, see Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 200-201.

⁴⁷ Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 29 and 77.

At secret meetings Lollards composed letters and bills expounding their views on church doctrines and distributed them for placement on doors and windows as public notices.⁴⁸

The contemporary association of written communication with Lollard activities also appears in *The Book of Margery Kempe*; Margery is arrested and accused of Lollardy in front of Archbishop Bowet for the letter she carries around with her: “Than cam tho too men which had arestyd hir, seyng wyth the frer that sche was Combomis dowtyr and was sent to beryn lettrys abowtyn the cuntre.”⁴⁹

The recourse to the written word as a means of influencing opinion was not confined to the Lollards. Even before the introduction of print culture, people found ways to publish and exchange their political ideas. A great number of letters, broadsides, and pamphlets circulated in England during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, showing how the government as well as rumor-mongers and protestors exploited the power of the written word for their own purposes. Written protests and proclamations flourished, especially because such media could spread news more widely than word-of-mouth. In his chronicle Walsingham observes that during the Cheshire rebellion of 1393, the insurgents used writing in order to spread their appeal: they informed people that the dukes of Gloucester and Lancaster intended to withdraw the realm of France from its allegiance to the king of England and destroy the ancient liberties of Cheshire; the rebels not only announced this [rumor] “*inter se privatim*, but also [drew] up bills which they

⁴⁸ M. E. Aston, “Lollardy and Sedition, 1381-1431,” *Past and Present* 17 (1960): 24-5.

⁴⁹ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley, TEAMS (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 1996), 131. Combomis refers to the Lollard Cobham, Sir John Oldcastle. For a discussion of Margery’s letter and its potential as a critique of church and civil government, see Ruth Shklar, “Cobham’s Daughter: *The Book of Margery Kempe* and the Power of Heterodox Thinking,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 56.3 (1995): 302.

fixed to the doors of churches, transmitting them to neighboring counties, seeking thereby to attract help.”⁵⁰ Walsingham’s statement suggests that people employed diverse means of written communication to express political as well as religious opposition.

In late medieval England personal correspondence emerged as an important medium of political communication. According to an Ipswich jury report of 1453, the letter offered a venue through which dissidents could transmit news, exchange ideas, and weave consensus among themselves: “And they [William Oldhall and his accomplices] sent letters to diverse counties of England, especially Kent and Sussex, urging rebellion against the king, on account of which the duke of Suffolk was murdered.”⁵¹ Describing how William Hall and his people attempted the death of the king with “diverse bills and writings,” the Ipswich juror thus accused them of treason. Here, the juror reveals his uneasiness over the subversive power of the written word by unconsciously connecting the letters of the protestors with the murder of the duke and by placing responsibility for his death on the letters.

Those who spread rumor through writing rather than speech were more likely to face lethal punishment since the evidence of their activity was easy to track down. In his account of the 1381 English Rising, Walsingham specifies that John Ball was punished because of the letter he sent to the leaders of the commons in Essex: “John Ball confessed that he wrote this letter and sent it to the commons, and that he made many others as well. For which reason, as I said before, he was drawn, hanged, and beheaded before the king

⁵⁰ *Annales Ricardi Secundi*, ed. H. T. Riley, Rolls Series 28 (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1866), 16, quoted in Ross, “Rumour, Propaganda, and Popular Opinion,” 19.

⁵¹ Public Record Office, Ancient Indictments Suffolk, K. B. 9/118/30. I use the record quoted in J. R. Lander, *Wars of the Roses* (London: White Lion Publishers, 1974), 63. For a detailed discussion of this document, see Chapter 3 of my dissertation.

at St. Albans, the ides of July; and his body was quartered and sent to four cities of the kingdom.”⁵² The letter, found in the jacket of a man who was about to be hanged for rioting, became undeniable evidence of offense by both John Ball and the man. A similar incident occurred in 1431, at the time of Jack Sharp’s rebellion, when a man was indicted for treason for the writing and publishing of several seditious bills. In 1456 John Hopton was hanged, drawn, and quartered “for writing bills touching the person of the king.”⁵³

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the posting of bills in public places had become so common and dangerous that the government issued proclamations forbidding the drafting and circulating of such seditious writing.⁵⁴ A royal proclamation of April 1450 prohibited even the reading of such bills, declaring that anyone found reading or publishing seditious writings would be deemed to be the author and punished accordingly.⁵⁵ A letter from Richard III to the mayor and the commons of the city of York evidences the king’s effort to control the circulation of political writing:

And where it is soo that diverse sedicious and evil disposed personnes both in our Citie of London and elleswher within this our Realme, enforce themself daily to sowe sede of noise and disclaundre agaynest our persone ... to abuse the multitude of our subgettts and averte ther mynds from us ... some by setting up of billes, some by messags and sending furthe of false and abhominable langage and lyes, some by bold and presumptuos opne speche and comunicacion oon with other, wher thurgh the innocent people whiche wold live in rest and peas, and truly under our obbeissance

⁵² Thomas Walsingham, *Chronicon Angliae*, ed. E. M. Thompson, Rolls Series 64 (London: Longman, 1875), 322. I rely on Justice (18) for the translation of this sentence.

⁵³ Ross, “Rumour, Propaganda, and Popular Opinion,” 16.

⁵⁴ V. J. Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), 22.

⁵⁵ The proclamation forbid people to “deliver, or shew, copy or cause to be copied or impart to any man secretly or openly any seditious schedule or bill”; it ordered people to “burn or tear” any “infamous bill” that had come into their hands,” thereby attempted to suppress the dissemination of subversive thoughts. See Scase, “Bill-Casting in Late Medieval England,” 229.

as they oght to doo, bene gretely abused, and oft tymes put in daungirs of ther lives, lands and goods, as ofte as thay folowe the stepps and devises of the said sedicious and mischievous persones, to our grete hevynesse and pitie.⁵⁶

Richard's letter illustrates his anxiety about the political power of written words.

Immediately after Queen Anne died on 16 March 1485, the country was buzzing with the rumor that the king had murdered his wife in order to marry his niece. The rumor spread beyond control, even taking on a political dimension.⁵⁷ In order to suppress the subversive rumor, Richard III wrote a letter affirming that he had no intention to marry his niece. The king stated that in many parts of the realm people exchanged "false and abhominable language and lyes" in order to "sowe sede of noise and disclaundre against the king." Dissidents set up bills and sent messages "openly" as well as "secretly" to stir up "innocent people" who had lived in "rest and peas." Since the spread of rumor against the king was an expression of political discontent, Richard's government put forth tremendous effort to prevent further dissemination of rumor. Richard III banned citizens from "telling of tales and tidings" and charged them to remove any seditious bill without "reding or shewing the same to any othre persone" and bring it directly to the authorities. These references to "bill[s]" and "messages" attest to an enhanced level of literacy in this period as well as the existence of a textual community that conveyed its opinions in written form. In fact, Richard III's use of the vernacular in a letter directed to the citizens of York and his prohibition of "reding" imply widespread vernacular literacy. The

⁵⁶ *York Civic Records*, vol. 1, ed. A. Raine, Record Series 98 (Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 1939), 115. For a discussion of Richard III's letter, see Ross, "Rumour, Propaganda, and Popular Opinion," 21-3.

⁵⁷ On the medieval function of rumor as an expression of political opposition, see Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 20-25; Ross, "Rumour, Propaganda, and Popular Opinion," 17-29; and Elton, *Policy and Police*, 46-82.

fifteenth-century linguistic environment that encouraged the use of English in writing had an impact on the production of vernacular letters and written communication.⁵⁸

Although it is impossible to characterize late medieval English society as either predominantly oral or literate, a study of the ways in which news circulated shows that the country during this period was experiencing a gradual transition from oral to written culture. A comparison of two proclamations, one issued in 1275 and the other in 1539, illustrates the shift. In the thirteenth century the English government exploited the marketplace proclamation as a tool for disseminating information about the kingdom, such as the death of a king, contents of new statutes, or commercial policies. According to detailed instructions appended to the Statute of Westminster I, issued in 1275, Edward I ordered sheriffs to “read and publicly and solemnly proclaim” the provisions of the statute in markets and other public places “for the sake of the common good.” But Henry VIII’s Statute of Proclamations in 1539 contains a specific request that sheriffs should post written copies in market centers.⁵⁹

Various developments during the late Middle Ages facilitated the extensive use of writing for the transmission of information. First, with the growing use of English for governmental records, the rate of literacy increased. Prior to 1300, the language of the literate laity had been French, but in the fourteenth century French gradually ceased to be the principal vernacular among English aristocrats. By 1362, pleadings in the King’s courts began to be made in English instead of French; by 1364, children were learning

⁵⁸ For the linguistic policy of Henry V, who encouraged the use of English in order to promote nationalism during the war against France, see John H. Fisher, “A Language Policy for Lancastrian England,” *PMLA* 107 (1992): 1168-1180.

⁵⁹ Masschael, “The Public Space of the Marketplace,” 391-2.

English in grammar schools.⁶⁰ According to John Trevisa, the first English translator of Ralph Higden's *Polychronicon*, "all the gramer scoles of Englonde" had replaced French with English by 1385.⁶¹ Furthermore, Henry V consciously encouraged the use of the vernacular by sending home war bulletins in English. Henry's language policy was welcomed by the nobility and the legal and commercial communities, all of whom began using English regularly and tried to follow royal models in style and language.⁶² The use of English in writing facilitated making records of orally conveyed information, thereby easing the transition from oral to written culture. Second, with the growing power of the crown in the fourteenth century, the old county courts became marginalized as their business was gradually appropriated by itinerant royal justices, and the government became more and more dependent on formalized written communication.⁶³ Also, new developments in handwriting made it possible to communicate through letters; the cursive script, employed primarily to accommodate bureaucratic demand for massive documentation, facilitated the production of personal missives written in haste while messengers were waiting.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Cyril Ernest Wright, *English Vernacular Hands: From the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), xii.

⁶¹ Andrew Galloway, "Writing History in England," *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 277.

⁶² Fisher, "A Language Policy for Lancastrian England," 1171-1174.

⁶³ Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, 135.

⁶⁴ On the development of the cursive script and its impact on written culture, see Paul Saenger, *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 257-58. See also M. B. Parkes, "The Literacy of the Laity," in *The Medieval World*, ed. David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby (London: Aldus Books, 1973), 563. According to Parkes, the development of the cursive script had significant impact on the spread of literacy during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. By 1400, the cursive script was used in nearly all kinds of books and documents. The extensive use of the script was advantageous for the "pragmatic reader" because he could read a book in the alphabet with which he had become familiar in the course of reading and drafting documents, without having to take the trouble to learn the difficult alphabets of the several varieties of the text hand. Furthermore, the convenience and the

Most important, the impact of the documentary culture that had developed in England from the eleventh century on played a key role in the use of writing for social communication. According to Clanchy, documents were the only written texts accessible to every social stratum.⁶⁵ The production and preservation of records in late medieval England were unprecedented. Before the Conquest, the number of extant written charters and writs is less than two thousand. From thirteenth century England, however, many tens of thousands documents survive; Clanchy estimates that several million charters might have been written in the thirteenth century alone.⁶⁶ The gradual accumulation of documents in archives and their distribution throughout the country prompted the growth of a literate mentality and promoted the use of writing in ordinary secular business. By the fourteenth century, even serfs and laborers knew how to sign their name on documents and understood what a document could achieve. In judicial courts, written agreements took on unprecedented importance, replacing the oral testimony or traditional symbolic objects that had formerly accompanied a conveyance of property.⁶⁷

My study of medieval letters as an expression of documentary culture is greatly indebted to the pioneering work of Clanchy and recent scholarship that has expanded Clanchy's study to illuminate the impact of documentary culture on every aspect and period of medieval society. Justice's *Writing and Rebellion*, R. F. Green's *A Crisis of Truth*, and Brian Stock's *Implications of Literacy* are only a few of the studies that

speed of the cursive script made it available as a cheap book hand, which ultimately affected the price of books and the growth of the reading public.

⁶⁵ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 49-52.

⁶⁶ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 1.

⁶⁷ See Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 11-59.

analyze the ways in which medieval society responded to and was influenced by the growing consciousness of written culture.⁶⁸ These scholars all agree that in the Middle Ages written culture spread as the result of a practical need for administration. Stock argues that medieval texts were basically “evidential documents,” a sort of “insurance policy in case that oral record was forgotten or obliterated.”⁶⁹ By introducing the idea of “textuality,” Stock reconfigures the framework for analyzing medieval literacy and explains how uneducated illiterate people participated in a fairly sophisticated written culture. Justice’s discussion of rebels’ letters during the English Rising of 1381 pays exclusive attention to the textual consciousness of the uneducated. Justice reminds us that the commons, including insurgents, were literate and that most people must have understood quite well the ways that the letters functioned.⁷⁰ The rebels burned legal documents not to destroy documentary culture, as contemporary chroniclers interpreted, but to “re-create” it: the rebels “recognized the written document as something powerful

⁶⁸ Brian Stock, *Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). See also Gellrich, “Orality, Literacy, and Crisis in the Later Middle Ages,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 67 (1988): 461-73; Rosamond Faith, “The ‘Great Rumor’ of 1377 and Peasant Ideology,” *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. Rodney Hilton and T. H. Aston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 43-73; and Franz Bauml, “Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy,” *Speculum* 55 (1980): 239-65. Charles Briggs’s essay offers a comprehensive survey of studies on the question of medieval literacy and written culture; see “Literacy, Reading and Writing in the Medieval West,” *Journal of Medieval History* 26 (2000): 397-420. For a recent study of late medieval documentary culture, see Steiner, *Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature*. Steiner emphasizes how late medieval documentary culture contributed to the shaping of an “identity for English literature” (10). Pointing to numerous metaphors and images of documents abundant in Passion lyrics, Lollard writings, and *Piers Plowman*, Steiner argues that documents offered an ideal of public writing, opening up a way of “re-creating” (10) an English literary tradition. Steiner’s optimistic understanding of the relationship between the documentary culture and contemporary literature fails to see late medieval literary texts’ complicated responses to the widespread use of documents. My readings of Chaucer’s works and late medieval English drama emphasize the significance of documentary culture by showing how these texts reflect, investigate, and criticize the penetration of the document into contemporary society.

⁶⁹ Stock, *Implications of Literacy*, 7.

⁷⁰ Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 66.

but also malleable, something that, once written, could be rewritten. When they successfully demanded charters of manumission from Richard II ... they showed a precise understanding of the forms and procedures of document and archive.”⁷¹ Whereas Justice explores the potential of the document as an empowering instrument of the disfranchised, Green investigates the spread of documentary culture in the legal world of Ricardian England. Focusing on the semantic transformation of the Middle English word “trouth,” Green traces a shift in the popular attitude toward the nature of evidence and proof. Observing that in the fourteenth-century a word that earlier had meant “integrity” began to retain its modern sense of “conformity to fact,” Green claims that the concept of truth shifted from an idea of something that resides in people to something located in documents.⁷²

These studies of medieval documentary culture all have shown how the use of documents brought about profound changes in individual intellect and society. Yet scholars have scarcely discussed how late medieval texts register the impact of documentary culture and how seriously these texts question the status of writing destabilized by contemporary abuse of written documents. Furthermore, there is no body of work that discusses the phenomenon of news in the late Middle Ages; nor is there a work that investigates the relationship of the documentary culture and social appetite for news to the production of fifteenth-century English letters.⁷³ Numerous proclamations, parliamentary petitions, legal pleas as well as broadsides were composed in the epistolary

⁷¹ Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 48.

⁷² Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, xiii-xvi.

⁷³ The importance of writing in late medieval political communication has been briefly mentioned in Ferster’s *Fictions of Advice*, 23.

form, and letter-writing emerged as the most powerful and familiar communicative act. The proliferation of letters clearly demonstrates the communal experience of a society undergoing a transition from oral to written culture. The emphasis on medieval letters' social function thus calls into question Jürgen Habermas's idea of the "public sphere" as emerging in the late seventeenth century.⁷⁴ Late medieval protestors' letters, royal proclamations, and personal correspondences demonstrate that already in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the notion of a discursive "public sphere" began to germinate. My historical readings of late medieval fictional and actual English letters bring new significance to the texts discussed in this dissertation, while revising the view of late medieval documentary culture in connection with the early modern print culture and the growth of public media.

Describing the social and historical contexts of the Paston Letters, Chapter 1 examines why such documents emerged at this period of history and what their functions were in late medieval English society. My reading demonstrates that one of the major concerns of the Paston letters is transmitting information about the current political and social situation. The letter-writers ask for and report various kinds of news, even if such news is gossip or rumor. I argue that the Pastons' participation in the public sphere was inseparably intertwined with letter-writing, paradoxically, the most private form of written communication; these personal letters played the role of fifteenth-century mass

⁷⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 5-26. According to Habermas, medieval society had no concept of a public sphere distinguished from a private realm. He claims that a "modern" notion of public and private occurs only after the middle of the sixteenth-century (11).

media by supplying the family with news of current affairs, expanding their knowledge of society and promoting critical thinking. The chapter claims that the Pastons' letter-writing prepared for the burgeoning of the bourgeois reading public.

Discussing the Pastons' use of literacy in communication, the chapter also illuminates the letter-writers' strong belief in the value of documents, arguing that the late medieval family was deeply invested in documentary culture and a literate mentality. As lawyers, the Pastons knew the power of written evidence better than anybody else. The letter-writers claim the validity and truth of their information by emphasizing that it is written down. For the Pastons, written information was more credible than oral, despite the dangers of forgery and interception. The strong emphasis on documentary evidence in their letters attests to the Pastons' trust in writing and understanding of what it could achieve.

Whereas Chapter 1 discusses "real" letters, Chapters 2 and 3 focus on fictional letters in order to investigate how late medieval literary texts respond to the development of documentary culture and the hunger for news. Comparing the Duke of Gloucester's Confession, written in 1391, and Donegile's counterfeit letters in *The Man of Law's Tale*, Chapter 2 discusses Chaucer's reservations about the reliability of written documents. Noting that lawyers were involved in both Gloucester's confession and *The Man of Law's Tale*, the chapter discusses problems of written documents implicated in both narratives, such as documentary manipulations, fears of interception, and suspicions of forgery. I suggest that Chaucer's close connections with contemporary legal circles would have made him aware that important political events during the reign of Richard II questioned

“the status of the text as an instrument of validating action.”⁷⁵ Despite an obvious connection between the Man of Law and the legal profession, *The Man of Law’s Tale* has never been studied in terms of the literate mentality of late medieval lawyers. The chapter analyzes the implications of writing and written documents in the prologue and the tale proper in order to show the Man of Law’s consciousness as deeply indebted to documentary culture.

The Man of Law’s understanding of the written document, its power and limitations, becomes much more clear when we compare his tale to *The Manciple’s Tale*, which also speculates on the limitations of human language as a medium for communication. Barely noted in the studies of Chaucer, the two tales are significantly related by both narrators’ involvement in the legal profession as well as their concerns about verbal activities. I argue that, while *The Man of Law’s Tale* communicates its narrator’s anxiety about the reliability of written documents, *The Manciple’s Tale* points out that human language is by its very nature untrustworthy.

In fourteenth- and fifteenth- century England, the proliferation of documents contributed to the dissemination of literate habits of mind; even the commons were familiar with the documentary culture by which a realm was governed.⁷⁶ Written documents, however, sometimes provoked suspicion because of their unreliability and the slipperiness of the written word. Chapter 3 explores medieval dramatic representation of ideological resistance to documentary culture and the government’s dependence on

⁷⁵ Gellrich, *Discourse and Dominion in the Fourteenth Century: Oral Contexts of Writing in Philosophy, Politics, and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 229. Gellrich uses the quotation in a different context, emphasizing the role of “orality” in an increasingly dominant written culture.

⁷⁶ Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 188.

textual authority. The letters and the messengers in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* serve to problematize the validity of the written documents on which the authority of secular power depends.

This chapter argues that resistance to and skepticism about the evidentiary value of written documents in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* is closely related to the importance of spectacle and bodily experience in East Anglian drama. Focusing on the problem of disinformation illustrated by the letters in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, the chapter discusses how developments in late medieval documentary culture are appropriated by this East Anglian play to demonstrate that the visual dimensions of theater give access to spiritual truths with a kind of immediacy that written documents cannot provide. Walter Ong asserts that oral culture has the advantage of achieving “close, emphathetic, and communal identification” between communicators, while writing “separates” the reader from the writer and thus strengthens a sense of personal disengagement.⁷⁷ My study emphasizes that, more than human speech, spectacular images in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* aim to engage the feeling of participation and a sense of unity and connectedness among the viewers, which the written messages of the temporal rulers also seek but fail to achieve.

⁷⁷ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982), 74.

CHAPTER 1: The Paston Letters

“Take Writing”: News, Documents, and Fifteenth-Century Personal Letters

... taciturn records can be squeezed until they talk.
-- Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion* –

On 7 May 1784 Horace Walpole wrote a letter to John Fenn, the first publisher of the Paston Letters. Encouraging him to publish the letters that had been in Fenn’s possession, Walpole depicted them as the “most curious papers of the sort” he had ever seen: “The historic picture they give of the reign of Hen. 6. makes them invaluable, & more satisfactory than any cold narrative. It were a thousand pities they should not be published, which I should be glad I could persuade you to do.”¹ The value of the Paston letters for a study of the political, social, and economic history of fifteenth century England has been remarked in many scholarly works.² C. L. Kingsford comments,

¹ Cited from Norman Davis’s introduction to *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), xxiv.

² For important historical studies of the Paston letters, see Colin Richmond’s trilogy, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: The First Phase* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Fastolf’s Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Endings* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). Throughout this three-volume study, Richmond attempts to “re-invent” the character of each family member while delineating the history of the family. The chapter on Margaret Paston is one of the most impressive parts of Richmond’s study. For a general understanding of fifteenth-century English society and culture mirrored in the Paston letters, see H. S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932). See also J. R. Lander’s account of the political history during the Wars of the Roses. Most of Lander’s materials are from the Paston letters; *The Wars of the Roses* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1965). Love and marriage are important topics in most historical studies of the Paston letters; for an essay devoted to the investigation of these two topics, see Keith Dockray, “Why Did Fifteenth-Century English Gentry Marry? : The Pastons, Plumpton, and Stonors Reconsidered,” *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Michael Jones (Gloucester, Alan

“among the subordinate sources for the history of the fifteenth century, the letters written in English by private individuals hold the foremost place.”³ Colin Richmond also describes the Paston letters as the “most exhilarating” historical narrative, “more absorbing and revealing than any Dumas, or Stevenson, or Scott.”⁴ Although the political perspectives of the Pastons are more or less factional, and the letters often fail to provide correct information about important contemporary events, their detailed narratives and personal responses offer a sense of the diversity and richness of fifteenth-century society that no official documents give.

Diane Watt’s essay on Paston women writers recognizes the potential of the Paston letters as an important source for the study of medieval women’s writing.⁵ Watt notes that in the dearth of medieval women’s writing in the Middle Ages, the Paston letters feature a large body of correspondence written by women. Of the 930 letters collected and published by Norman Davis in 1929, 174 are from women writers. Margaret Paston, one of the most prolific Paston correspondents, wrote 104 letters, and these form the largest collection of personal letters written by a woman in Middle

Sutton, 1986), 61-80.

³ C. L. Kingsford, *Promises and Prejudices in Fifteenth-Century England* (London: F. Cass, 1962), 22.

⁴ Richmond, *The Paston Family: Endings*, 238.

⁵ For studies of the Paston women writers, see Diane Watt, “‘No Writing for Writing’s Sake’: The Language of Service and Household Rhetoric in the Letters of the Paston Women,” *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, ed. Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 122-38; and Watt’s essay included in her recent edition of the Paston women’s letters, *The Paston Women: Selected Letters* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 134-58. Watt investigates issues such as medieval women’s education and literacy, rhetorical aspects of women’s writing, and the roles women played in the local community as well as the domestic arena. See also Finke’s discussion of the epistolary genre and medieval women’s writing in *Women’s Writing in English: Medieval England* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), 111-17 and 187-197. On the importance of domestic relationships in the Paston women’s textual practice, see Rebecca Krug, *Reading Families: Women’s Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 17-64.

English.⁶ As her husband's representative or landowner in her own right, Margaret wrote business letters and kept her husband informed about the running of household.

Margaret's letters epitomize the accomplishment of many woman writers who turned their social and educational limitations into advantage and made their voices heard.

Scholars of the Paston letters have expanded our understanding of late medieval English society and people. Richmond's exhaustive account of the fifteenth-century lawyer family, for instance, illuminates the multiplicity of the family's concerns, struggles, and ambitions. The vivid portraits of family members delineated by Richmond's meticulous reading of the letters present a microscopic vision of medieval life and make the Pastons alive again. Watt's essay shows the active life of "real" medieval women who dominated the domestic sphere, confronted local magnates, and dedicated themselves to enhancing the honor of the family.

The studies of Richmond and Watt, however, do not consider the Paston letters in the context of the epistolary genre. As Giles Constable emphasizes, the production of fifteenth-century English letters was a remarkable phenomenon in the history of medieval letter-writing: with writers such as the Stonors, Celys, and Pastons, the letter as a genre resumed the central position in literary culture that it had held before its decline in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁷ These writers, Constable claims, broke out of the

⁶ Fifteenth-century England produced three great collections of English letters: one written by the Celys, a merchant family in London; one by the Stonors, another merchant family from Oxfordshire; and one by the Pastons, lawyers in Norfolk. The Paston letters are the largest and the most significant collection. As to the number of women's letters included in other collections, the Stonors have thirty six letters by women writers and the Celys only two letters.

⁷ Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1976), 39. For a study specializing in the epistolary genre in medieval England, see John Taylor, "Letters and Letter-Collections in England, 1300-1420," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 24 (1980): 57-70; and C. L. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1963), 193-227. Kingsford's survey calls attention to the rise of English as the common means of written communication during the

traditional framework of Latin epistolography and created “the type of intimate vernacular private letter that is familiar today.”⁸ Their letters were different from earlier self-conscious literary and philosophical letters written in order to communicate the authors’ thoughts and ideas to a the general public. Exchanged among family members and friends, the fifteenth-century vernacular letters provide an insight into the real workings of contemporary society and families.

Constable’s statements illuminate the significance of the Paston letters in the history of medieval letters. But like Richmond and Watt, Constable does not explain why letter-writing became so popular during the fifteenth century, why such documents emerged at this period of history, and what their functions were in contemporary society. As Laurie Finke correctly observes, the Pastons understood the letter differently from the ways we understand it today.⁹ In modern society, the epistle offers an “immediate form of self-expression, unadorned by literary artifice.”¹⁰ Personal letters are often described as “imprints of the soul” and “containers for the outpourings of the heart.”¹¹ But in a society

reign of Henry IV. For studies of medieval women’s letters, see Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, ed. *Dear Sister*; Joan M. Ferrante, “‘Licet longinquis regionibus corpore separati’: Letters as a Link in and to the Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 76 (2001): 877-895; and Albrecht Classen, “Emergence from the Dark: Female Epistolary Literature in the Middle Ages,” *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Associations* 10 (1989): 1-15.

⁸ Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*, 40.

⁹ Finke, *Women’s Writing in English*, 112.

¹⁰ Finke, *Women’s Writing in English*, 112.

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 48. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that underscored the notion of subjectivity and intimate feelings, the letter became an efficient medium of expressing the self. Habermas observes, however, that even the “well worded family letter of the seventeenth century, which before all else declared ‘married love and faithfulness’ to the spouse and affirmed filial obedience to parents, still had its mainstay in the dry communications, the news reports (*Zeitungen*), which had by then become a separate and distinctive rubric” (49). Although Habermas focuses his discussion on the situation of seventeenth century Germany, his characterization can be applied to England. Whyman mentions that the “quest for self-expression and privacy” is one of the

without radios, emails, newspapers, and televisions, personal correspondence served as one of few channels through which the Pastons could stay connected with the outside world. One of the most important functions of these fifteenth-century personal letters is to circulate news and information about public affairs. The Pastons preserved their letters not with an eye for “future publication” but as material evidence of their public transactions as well as a private chronicle that bore witness to the society in which the family lived.

Considering the fifteenth-century personal letters as an integral part of late medieval English culture, I examine the condition of contemporary society in which the Pastons wrote their letters. I show that production of the letters was influenced by a convergence of historical forces: late medieval England’s hunger for news, the development of documentary culture, the expansion of literacy, and the increasing importance of the vernacular as a means of practical communication. Particularly, my discussion in this chapter focuses on the intersection between a social hunger for news and a documentary culture that had triggered a profound change in individuals and society and argue that late Middle English personal letters served as a medium for social communication before a set of cultural institutions such as coffee houses, salons, publishing companies, and journals developed as a forum for public discourse.

important historical factors of post-Restoration letters; see Whyman, “ ‘Paper Visits’: The Post-Restoration Letters as Seen Through the Verney Family Archive,” *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945*, ed. Rebecca Earle (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 15.

“As for tydynges...”

P. O. Kristeller describes late medieval letters as the “carriers of news.”¹² Even in the fourteenth century, public information was often transmitted through personal correspondence. A letter of Edward the Black Prince to his wife Joan, written two days after the battle of Nájera on 3 April 1367, illustrates how medieval personal correspondence played a part in the circulation of news and information. Announcing England’s victory over France, the Black Prince gave a detailed account of the situation at the front, including even the names, number, and rank of the dead, wounded, and those taken prisoners. Princess Joan, who was then staying at Bordeaux, forwarded her husband’s letter to Edward III in England. On 30 April of the same year, Simon Langham, archbishop of Canterbury, ordered the promulgation of the Prince’s triumph, based on the intelligence that the king had received from the forwarded letter. The letter of the Black Prince appears to have circulated widely outside the court; for example, the account of the battle of Nájera in the *Anominalle Chronicle* of St. Mary’s, York demonstrates that the chronicle’s compiler had secured the letter and followed it point by point.¹³ The close resemblance between the Black Prince’s letter and the chronicle, and the whole process of the letter’s circulation and preservation, suggest that the prince’s

¹² P. O. Kristeller, “The Contribution of the Religious Orders to Renaissance Thought and Learning,” *Medieval Aspects of Renaissance Learning: Three Essays*, ed. E. Mahoney, Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies I (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1974), 109. On medieval letters as carriers of news, see also Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 14-26; and Janet Coleman, *English Literature in History 1350-1400: Medieval Readers and Writers* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 50-51.

¹³ A. E. Prince, “A Letter of Edward the Black Prince describing the Battle of Nájera in 1367,” *English Historical Review* 1 (1926), 415-417. Prince’s article contains the transcription of the letter written in Norman French. The modern English translation of this letter is collected in *Memorials of London and London Life in the 13th, 14th, and 15th Centuries*, ed. Henry Thomas Riley (London: Longmans, Green, 1868), 285-8.

personal correspondence was considered a document, and therefore evidence of the English victory.¹⁴

The Paston letters show that the use of writing to circulate information, demonstrated in the royal court's handling of the Black Prince's letter, extended down to private individuals such as the Pastons. A letter from Edmund Clere to his cousin John Paston I, written on 9 January 1455, illustrates this point:¹⁵

Right welbiloued cosyn, I recommaund me to you, latyng you wite such tidinges as we haue. Blessid be God, the Kyng is wel amendid, and hath ben syn Cristemesday; and on Seint Jones Day commaunded his awmener [almoner] to ride to Caunterbury with his offryng, and commaunded the secretarie to offre at Seint Edward. And on the Moneday after noon the Queen come to him and brought my lord Pryn[c]e with here; and then he askid what the princes name was, and the Queen told him Edward; and than he hild vp his handes and thankid God þerof.¹⁶

When Edmund Clere wrote this letter, the ineffective kingship of Henry VI and the political ambition of Richard, duke of York, had thrown England into a politically precarious condition. As a descendent of Edward III through Lionel of Clarence and the Mortimer line, York felt that he should be recognized as heir presumptive to the childless king. In 1453 Henry VI became insane, offering York an opportunity to realize his

¹⁴ During the Hundred Years War personal correspondence was frequently used for propagandistic purposes. It was also employed as a medium of public communication that transmitted the situation at the front; see Kenneth Fowler, "News from the Front: Letters and Despatches of the Fourteenth Century," *Guerre et Société en France: de Louis XIV à Napoléon I^{er}*, ed. Jean-Paul Bertaud (Paris: Armand Colin, 1998), 63-92.

¹⁵ The Paston letters and the letter of the Black Prince, however, perform differently. The Black Prince wrote his letter in Norman French, whereas the Pastons communicated in English. The government circulated the Black Prince's letter for specific propagandistic purpose; the Paston letters were nonofficial private products, and their news was gathered and circulated voluntarily in order to satisfy the correspondents' social and political interest.

¹⁶ *The Paston Letters and Papers*, no. 512, 2: 108. Subsequent references to the Paston Letters will use Davis's numbering of the letters.

political ambition. On 15 October of the same year, Henry's only child, Prince Edward, was born, destroying Richard of York's hopes of the succession. Although York managed to have himself declared the Protector and thwarted Margaret of Anjou's attempt to eliminate him by assuming the regency herself, Henry VI's recovery of his sanity on Christmas of 1454, a few weeks before Edmund Clere wrote this letter, brought about a shift of political power. York's short protectorate came to an end, and he had to leave the court.¹⁷ Edmund Clere's letter is one of the few ways that this Norfolk family could keep informed of political changes.

Clere's letter to his cousin John Paston I raises questions about the private and public as apt descriptive terms for late medieval letter-writing.¹⁸ The Paston letters that ask for paternal favor or express conjugal love and concern certainly approach the idea of a letter as intimate private communication. But the Pastons often write letters with the sole purpose of exchanging important public information. Finke observes that the letters written by "pragmatic readers" of the fifteenth century often abandon the "fiction of intimate discourse"; they are "much less revealing of an individual's interiority than a record of the social networks in which that individual located herself."¹⁹ Classen also

¹⁷ On the political situation of England from 1453 to 1455, see J. R. Lander, *The Wars of the Roses*, 36-98.

¹⁸ From antiquity, the letter has been regarded as a "conversation between two absent friends." Ambrose explained that the epistolary genre had developed "in order that someone may speak to us when we were absent." The Patriarch Nicholas I of Constantinople considered the letter more valuable than actual conversation, depicting it as "the spiritual converse" of those separated in body; see Susan Whyman, "'Paper Visits': the Post-Restoration Letter as Seen Through the Verney Family Archive," *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945*, ed. Rebecca Earle (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 19; and Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*, 13. Implicit in the idea of the letter as a "conversation between friends" is the recognition that an intimate feeling is the essence of letter-writing.

¹⁹ Finke, *Women's Writing in English*, 112. For the reference to the "pragmatic readers," see Malcolm Parkes, "The Literacy of the Laity," *The Medieval World*, ed. David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby (London: Hambleton Press, 1973), 555-77. Although the Paston collection scarcely contains letters that express strong intimate feelings, a possibility exists that unlike the evidentiary documents, the Pastons did not preserve personal love letters. Richard Calle once wrote to Margery Paston, daughter of John Paston I

notes that even the letters between husband and wife hardly exhibit any sign of emotional bonds: “[Margaret Paston’s] letters . . . abound in pragmatic, economic concerns and rarely rise above ordinary aspects. Love and emotional affection, as they often come forth in many of the German letters, are rarely mentioned.”²⁰ The comments of both Finke and Classen point to the “pragmatic” and documentary aspects of the Paston letters.

The personal quality of the Paston letters has to do more with the relationship between sender and reader than the subject matter of the letter. Davis’s collection of the Paston letters includes only one letter sent from Edmund Clere to his cousin John Paston I. But Clere’s letter scarcely communicates any personal news or intimate feelings. As a member of the Royal Household, Clere might have been better aware of the political importance of the king’s recovery than anyone else. Clere also knew well that his cousin would greatly appreciate his information since political changes at court often had an impact on the life of the Pastons at Norfolk.

In fifteenth-century England, the circulation of news of national as well as local affairs was largely the product of private correspondence; under such conditions, a close, intimate relationship among correspondents was integral to the reliability of the information conveyed.²¹ The Paston writers often affirm that they are reliably informed.

and Margaret Paston, “Mastres, I am aferde to write to you, for I vndrestond ye haue schewyd my letters þat I haue sent you be-for this tyme; but I prey you lete no creatur se this letter. as sone as ye haue redde it lete it be brent, for I wolde no man schulde se it in no wice. Ye had no wrytyng from me this ij yere, nor I wolle not sende you no mor; therfor I remytte all this matre to your wisdom” (no. 861, 2: 500). It seems that Calle had sent more letters to Margery before writing this one. But only this letter from Calle to Margery has survived; there is none from Margery to Calle. It could be possible that she either did not know how to write or burned the letters, being afraid that their secret marriage might be discovered.

²⁰ Classen, “Emergence from the Dark,” 9.

²¹ The ways that news was collected for the first newspapers in the seventeenth century suggests some connections between late medieval personal correspondence and the development of the newspaper. The editors of the seventeenth-century periodicals received a flood of letters from which they published a selection each week. The first newspapers were in fact batches of letters. The *Spectator* provided a lion’s

In a letter to her husband John Paston I, Margaret Paston wrote that her information was given by “someone who is well-disposed toward you” (no. 158, 1: 264). In 1455 John Fastolf asked John Paston I to give information about the person who defamed him at a dinner in Norwich: “I prey yow, as my truste is in yow, that ye geve me knowelege be writing what jentylnen they be that had this report, wyth more, and what mo jentylnen were present, as ye wold I shuld and were my deute to do for yow in semblabyll wyse” (no. 514, 2:109-110). John Paston I was related to Fastolf through his wife Margaret Paston and served as one of the executors of his will. When Fastolf died in 1459, he left all his Suffolk and Norfolk estates subject to John Paston I’s claim. Fastolf’s trust in John Paston I relied on the intimate and special relationship between them.

Richmond notes that fifteenth-century English people scarcely wrote letters to amuse; they wrote only to inform:²²

The Pastons wanted to know what was going on nationally. Innumerable letters written to members of the family demonstrate their interest in what was happening in London, at Westminster, and abroad. There is, therefore, no shadow of a doubt that the Pastons were, like almost all members of the gentry, political. The Wars of the Roses were as much their wars as anyone’s.²³

Richmond’s brief observation explains how this fifteenth-century gentry family of Norfolk received information about national public affairs. The Paston letters often begin with reference to “tidings” or “nouvelties,” pointing specifically to the current political

head attached to a coffee house so that the reader could throw his letter through the lion’s jaw; see Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 42.

²² Richmond, *The Paston Family: Endings*, 93. Kingsford also agrees that not a few of the Paston Letters were written for the sole purpose of supplying the recipient with the latest information on politics or matters of public interest; see *English Historical Literature*, 149.

²³ Richmond, *The Paston Family: Endings*, 9.

situation.²⁴ Reporting the victory of Edward IV at the battle of Towson in 1461, William Paston II wrote to John Paston I that he “send no er vn-to you be-cause we had non cert[eyn tyd]nyngys tyl now; for vn-to þis day London was as sory citée as mygth, and be-cause Spordauns had no certeyn tydyngys we thought ye schuld take them a worthe tyl more certayn. ... And Jesu spede you. We pray you that this tydyngys my moder may knowe” (no. 90, 1: 165). William’s excuse, that he had not sent any letter since he had “non cert[eyn tyd]nyngys,” shows that the communication of news was the major motive of the Pastons’ letter-writing.

The Paston writers endeavored to transmit information as accurate (“certeyn”) as possible. Especially, letters conveying news about national affairs usually exhibit the precision of a newspaper. The famous letter of William Lomnor (5 May 1450) to John Paston I is a case in point.²⁵ Richmond commends Lomnor’s as a “model” letter with its “finest paratactic prose.”²⁶ Confessing that he “wesshe this litel bille with sorwfulle terys,” Lomnor began his report that William de la Pole, the Duke of Suffolk, had been murdered near Dover.²⁷ After describing how the master of a ship called “Nicholas of the

²⁴ For instance, William Paston II’s letter to his brother John Paston I (late July, 1454) begins with the phrase “as for tidings”; Edmund Clere’s letter quoted above also begins with a heading, “I recommend me to you, letting you wit such tidings as we have”; see *The Paston Letters*, no. 83, 1: 154 and no. 512, 2:108.

²⁵ A gentleman of Mannington near Gresham, William Lomnor often acted for John I in matters of business. Margaret once referred to him as “my brother,” and both John II and John III called him “my cousin”; see *The Paston Letters and Papers*, no. 438, 1: 299-300. Richmond suggests that Lomnor was not a servant but a relative who had a long and affectionate association with the Pastons. See Richmond, *The Paston Family: Fastolf’s Will*, 50.

²⁶ Richmond, *The Paston Family: Fastolf’s Will*, 49-50.

²⁷ Lomnor calls his letter a “bille,” a term that refers to a written document, statement in writing, or written statement of a case. In medieval England, the word carried with it a strong legal implication, although it sometimes meant simply a “letter”; see Wendy Scase, “‘Strange and Wonderful Bills’: Bill-Casting and Political Discourse in Late Medieval England,” *New Medieval Literatures*, ed. Rita Copeland, Davis Lawton, and Wendy Scase (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 237.

Tower” had humiliated the duke by calling him a traitor, Lomnor recounted the scene of murder:

And whanne he come the mastere bade hym, “Wolcome, traitour,” as men sey. And yn the syght of all his men he was drawyn ought of the grete shippe yn-to the bote, and there was an exe and a stoke, and oon of the lewdeste of the shippe badde hym ley down hys hedde and he shuld be faire ferd wyth and dye on a swerd; and toke a rusty swerd and smotte of his hedde withyn halfe a doseyn strokes, and toke away his gown of russette and his dobelette of veluet mayled and leyde his body on the sondes of Dover. (No. 450, 2: 36)

Richmond suggests that the letter might have been based on an eye-witness account since the narrative could not have achieved such vividness with information gleaned from a “print-out (newsletter).”²⁸ In March 1450, just two months before this letter was written, Margaret reported to her husband that the duke had been pardoned and was “rytz wel at ese and mery, and in the Kyngys godegrase and in þe gode conseyt of all þe lordys as well as ever he [had been]” (no. 136, 1: 237). The report of the duke’s pardon, however, was inaccurate; after his impeachment, the duke was exiled for five years instead of being sent for trial. As if correcting that falsehood, Lomnor specified the date that he received the news and emphasized that the information came from London: “As on Monday nexte after May Day there come tydynges to London that on Thorsday before the Duke of Suffolk come vnto the costes of Kent full nere Dower with his ij shepes and a litel spynner, the qweche spynner he sente with certeyn letters be certeyn of his trusted men vnto Caleys warde, to knowe howe he shuld be resceyuyd” (no. 450, 2: 35). Perhaps Lomnor’s “tidings” gave a sigh of relief to John I, since the duke had been one of the enemies of the Pastons – and Sir John Fastolf. But Lomnor’s mention of “sorrowful

²⁸ Richmond, *The Paston Family: Fastolf’s Will*, 50, n.167.

tears” made his report balanced and impartial. His precise and detailed narrative, such as the description of the master who “toke a rusty swerd and smote of his hedde withyn halfe a doseyn strokes,” presents to the reader a vivid picture of the moment of Suffolk’s death while enhancing the credibility of the letter-writer’s report. The direct quotation, “Wolcom, traitour,” also brings to the narrative the immediacy of a news-report.

The accuracy of an eye-witness account, however, does not appear in every letter. For instance, relating the situation at the front to his brother John Paston I (23 January 1461), Clement Paston wrote that his information was based on rumor. The letter was written during the military conflict of 30 December 1460, when Queen Margaret’s army heavily defeated the Yorkist forces near Wakefield. Reporting the names of the dead and missing from the battle, Clement wrote that according to “comyn voyss,” Thomas “Colt, Sire Jamyes Strangwysse and Sir Thomas Pyeryng” were dead (no. 114, 1:197). Clement Paston’s information was mistaken. Thomas Colt, a member of York’s council since 1453, was not killed; Colt served as a chamberlain of the Exchequer, chancellor of the earldom of March, and a member of the King’s council until he died in 1467. It was also Sir James Pickering, not Sir Thomas Pickering, who died at Wakefield.²⁹

The Pastons valued information, whether it was based on rumor or not; they used it to consolidate the relationship among family members. Margaret Paston advised her son John Paston II to send news about the king as a way to gain esteem from his father: “I wold ye shuld not spare to write to hym ageyn as lowly as ye cane, besecheyng hym to be your good fader, and send hym such tydyngs as beth in the contré ther ye bethe in, and

²⁹ See Davis, ed., *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 63, n. 1 and 3. The Paston letter writers often use phrases such as “it was noised that,” “there is a great talking,” and “it is talked here,” indicating that their information is based on rumor or local gossip; see *The Paston Letters and Papers*, no. 154, 1: 259 and no. 231, 1: 392.

that ye be ware of your expence bettyr and ye have be before thys tyme, and be your owne purse-berere. I trowe ye shall fynd yt most profytable to you” (no.175, 1: 288).³⁰

That not only men but also women were interested in information is evident in Agnes Paston’s desire to hear the news of William de la Pole’s negotiation of peace in France. She asked her son Edmund Paston I to send “tydynggis from beyond see, for here thei arn aferde to telle soche as be reported” (no. 14, 1: 28). Agnes’s letter to her son John Paston I (11 March, 1450), complaining that he did not reply to her letter, also intimates how much Agnes valued and desired for news from her son: “And for as meche as ye wyll send me no tydyngys, I send yow seche as ben in thys contré” (no. 20, 1: 32). After giving a detailed account of how the French enemy vessels had invaded Yarmouth and plundered English people, Agnes concluded her letter with a reminder that John should “remembyr the letter” that she had sent to him (no.20, 1:33).

Although Richmond asserts that the Pastons never wrote to amuse, they seemed to find “entertainment” in the news conveyed by their family members. In 1453 Margaret wrote to her husband, “þe Quene come in-to þis town on Tewysday last”:

... and she [Queen Margaret] sent after my cosyn Elysabeth Clere be Sharynborn to come to here. And she durst not dysabey here commandment, and come to here. And when she come in þe Quenys presens þe Quene made right meche of here, and desyrid here to have an hosbond, þe which ye shall know of here-after; but as for that, he is non nerrere than he was before. The Quene was right well pleased wyth here answe, and reportyht of here in þe best wyse, and seyth be here trowth she sey no jantylwomman syn she come into Norfoolk þat she lykyth better þan she doth here. (no. 146, 1: 249)

The letter gives a detailed account about this event, focusing on the Queen’s interview

³⁰ Drawing on Gardiner, Davis suggests that when Margaret wrote this letter, Sir John had gone north to join the king (Edward IV), who was then staying in Yorkshire; see Davis’s headnote on the letter no. 175, 1:287.

with their cousin Elizabeth Clere and her interest in the process of Elizabeth's marriage arrangement. After reporting how Elizabeth's answer pleased the Queen, Margaret then entreated John to buy "somme thyng" for her neck: "When þe Quene was here I borowd my cosyn Elysabet Cleris devys, for I durst not for shame go wyth my bedys among so many fresch jamtylwomman as here were at þat tym." Margaret's complaint about the lack of appropriate jewelry reveals her excitement at such an unusual event as the Queen's visit to Norwich.

News from abroad, especially that of a royal wedding, was likely to entertain the family. Brothers John II and John Paston III, having gone to Bruges in Princess Margaret's retinue, sent a letter to their mother containing the news of the wedding of Princess Margaret, youngest sister of Edward IV, to Charles Duke of Burgundy:

As for tydyngys her, my Lady Margaret was maryd on Sunday last past at a towne þat is callyd The Damme, iij myle owt of Brugys, at v of the clok in the morning. And sche was browt the same day to Bruggys to hur dener, and ther sche was receyuyd as worchepfully as all the world cowd deuys, as wyth presessyon wyth ladys and lordys best beseyn of eny pepyll that euer I sye or herd of, and many pagentys wer pleyid in hyr wey in Bryggys to hyr welcomyng, the best þat euer I sye. And as for the Duke's court, as of lords, ladies and gentlewomen, knights, squires, and gentlemen, I heard never of none like to it save King Arthur's court.
(no. 330, 1: 538-539)

John Paston III communicated with journalistic precision an eye-witness account of when and where the wedding took place and how the princess was received at Bruges. His description of the exotic mood and fantasy of the Burgundy's court, evoked by the allusion to the court of King Arthur, must have offered a great source of entertainment and gossip for Margaret, who had never been out of East Anglia.

John Paston III's letter from Bruges shows that a letter functioned as a newspaper for the Pastons, supplying them with all sorts of information. News of the pestilence reached the Pastons through their correspondence. In 1454 William Paston II wrote from London, "Here is gret pestelens. I purpose to fle in-to the contré" (no. 84, 1:156). The plague of 1471 in Norfolk was registered in Margaret's letter to John Paston III. She informed John Paston III of the death of their neighbors and relatives, then assured him that her own household and the parish were still safe. "We leuyn in fere," she said, "but we wut not qweder to fle fore to be better than we arn here" (no. 209, 1: 355). It was also through letters that the Pastons and their correspondents learned of the invasion of foreign enemies and rampant looting in other parts of the country. John Paston I's letter addressed to his wife Margaret Paston and his servants John Daubeney and Richard Calle (15 January 1465) bore witness to a dangerous condition of English society: "Item, remembir well to take heed at your gates on nyghtes and dayes for theves, for thei ride in diuers contré with gret felaship like lordes, and ride out of on shire in-to-a-nother" (no.72, 1: 131).

Not only news of national significance but also local rumors and gossip circulated among members of the family. Orally communicated news played an important part in late medieval social life; as Strohm asserts, it performed the "vital function of unifying an already intimate circle of hearers ... in shared belief about appropriate and inappropriate behavior."³¹ People gathered for talk and edification; casual talk on the field and at taverns, or gossip with neighbors at church, contributed to formulating consensus and transmitting traditions. For instance, the narrative of John Heydon's cuckoldry, recorded

³¹ Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of the Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 134.

in Margaret's letter to John Paston I, was shared among neighbors as a sort of moral lesson, reminding them of traditions and values of the community. In 1444, Margaret wrote to her husband about the local gossip that she had "herde seyn": "Heydonnis wyffe had child on Sent Petyr Day. I herde seyne þat herre husbond wille nowt of here, nerre of here child þat sche had last nowdyre. I herd seyn þat he seyde 3yf sche come in hesse precence to make here exkewce þat he xuld kyt of here nose to makyn here to be know wat sche is, and yf here child come in hesse presence he seyde he wyld kyllyn" (no. 127, 1: 220). John Heydon's cuckoldry and the birth of an illegitimate child took on a particular significance for Margaret and the Pastons, since the event happened in the same year that William Paston I finally recovered East Beckham, the estate once belonged to Edmund Winter. John Heydon's wife Eleanor Winter was Edmund Winter's daughter. As Richmond notes, for Margaret "words are too precious to be wasted"; John Heydon's humiliation marked a memorable moment for the Pastons who had made every effort to recover the family estate.³²

One of Margaret's letters to John Paston II shows, however, that the Pastons recorded and preserved a similar story of humiliation and disgrace as a written document. In September 1469, after having found out that her daughter Margery had been secretly married to the family bailiff, Richard Calle, Margaret tried to persuade the bishop of Norwich to annul the marriage. Although the bishop said that he knew well how Margery's behavior pierced Margaret's heart painfully, he had to announce the marriage vow to be legally binding. Deeply disappointed, Margaret disowned Margery and never

³² See Richmond, *The Paston Family: Endings*, 104.

forgave her.³³ She advised her son John Paston II, who was then the head of the family, not to take the result too “pensyly” although it caused pain in the heart of everyone in the family:

Remembyre 3ow, and so do I, þat we haue lost of here but a brethele, and setyt þe les to hart; fore and sche had be good, wat so euere sche had be yt xuld not a ben os jt tys, fore and he were ded at thys owyre sche xuld neuere be at myn hart as sche was (no. 203, 1: 343).

John Paston II seems to have suggested to Margaret that his sister and Calle should obtain a divorce. But Margaret did not accept the idea, telling him that it would offend God and his conscience: “fore and 3e do, ore cause fore to be do, God wul take vengawns there- vpon and 3e xuld put 3owr-sylfe and othere in gret joparté” (no. 203, 1: 343). She then expressed her hope that Margery bitterly repent her “leudness” in the future (no.203, 1:343).

Margaret’s letter shows how late medieval documentary culture had influenced the practice of letter-writing. Margaret had ample opportunity to become familiar with this culture. A lawyer’s wife, she attended the shire court in person and entreated the judges to intervene in the family’s dispute with the duke of Suffolk.³⁴ She was also shown to deliver or obtain writs, warrants, and “copys of inquisicions” (no. 77, 1: 141) for her husband. Watt maintains that the Paston women were familiar with legal terminology and understood legal issues they had to address in order to run the

³³ That she did not forgive Margery is evident in the specifications of her will. Margaret did not mention Margery or Richard Calle in her will. Margery must have been dead when Margaret made her will, but Calle was not. Margaret, however, remembered their children in her will; see Richmond, *The Paston Family: Endings*, 122.

³⁴ The Pastons considered legal education as crucial to social success. Agnes Paston advised her son Edmund to remember his father Judge William’s counsel to “lerne the lawe”: “for he seyde manie tymis that ho so euer schuld dwelle at Paston schulde have need to conne defende hymselfe” (no. 14, 1: 27).

household; although the women did not have formal education, their legal competence evidences their learning.³⁵ Margaret's long letter about her daughter Margery is extremely well written, persuasive and clear, despite the strong emotional disturbance embedded in Margaret's narrative. Without missing a detail, Margaret describes chronologically the procedure of the bishop's interrogation. The letter sounds more like a court record than a personal correspondence. Margaret never loses her composure, despite the pain. The reasons why she does not want to consider the idea of divorce are considerate and rational. This logical and lucid style of writing illustrates that Margaret was familiar with legal documents and knowledge.

The Pastons lived in a period in which orally transmitted traditions and norms began to be textualized and documented. Margaret Paston's letter about Margery's secret marriage preserves the narrative of humiliation that could have disappeared from memory as gossip. With her writing, Margaret attempted to make a record of her own family history. Georges Duby explains that profound changes occurred during the fourteenth century, when people began to write more about their own private lives and felt a need to describe and transmit their reactions to events about which earlier generations had been silent; journal writing became popular, and the documentary recording of everyday life was a common practice of writers, such as lawyers and merchants.³⁶ News and information that had been circulated by word of mouth began to be written down as the society became more exposed to and invested in documentary culture. The growing use of the vernacular in official documents and letter-writing in the fifteenth century

³⁵ Watt, " 'No Writing for Writings Sake' ," 125.

³⁶ Georges Duby, *A History of Private Life II: Revelations of the Medieval World* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988), 535-554.

facilitated the transition from an oral to a written culture. The impact of documentary culture was especially evident in legal circles, since the development of this culture was mainly driven by bureaucratic and legal demands of government.³⁷ As a lawyer family, the Pastons were acutely aware of the cultural change whereby the social structure was reorganized through writing and documents.

Margaret Paston and Writing

Margaret Paston's writings clearly illustrate how documentary culture shaped the mental world of the Pastons. In 1478, Margaret dictated a will to her son John Paston III. Identifying herself as the wife of John Paston and "doughter and heire to John Mauteby, squire," Margaret specified that her body be buried at the church of Mautby "byfore the ymage of Our Lady there, jn which ele reste the bodies of diuers of myn aunceteres" (no. 230, 1: 383). Margaret made provision for her tombstone, as well as a detailed instruction for the funeral, in which she desired twelve "pore" men among her tenants to carry twelve torches around her hearse. The tenants were to wear "white gownes with hodes" and receive four pence each for their trouble. Margaret wished to be commemorated thereafter for twelve years with tapers burning "vpon [her] grave ich Sonday and haliday at all diuine seruice to be seid or sunge in the seid church, and dailly at the masse of that preest that shall singe there in the seid ele for my sowle." She also requested an "honest secular prest" to sing and pray for the souls of her ancestors as well as hers for twelve

³⁷ Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), xiv.

years after her death. The will concludes with a list of bequests made to Margaret's tenants and servants, to the poor and needy, to various churches and hospitals, as well as to her surviving children and grandchildren.³⁸

An ordinary document composed according to certain conventional forms, Margaret's will impresses us with her attention to details. Particularly, her instruction for the design of the tombstone exemplifies this point, showing how a "taciturn" document can speak so vividly about the life of a woman who had lived more than a half millennium ago:³⁹

Item, I wull that myn executours purveye a stoon of marble to be leyde alofte vpon my grave within a yer next after my decesse; and vpon that stoon I wulle have iiij scochens sett at the iiij corners, wherof I wulle that the first scochen shalbe of my husbondes armes and myn departed, the ij of Mawtebys armes and Berneys of Redham departed, the ij of Mawtebys armes and the Lord Lovyn departed, the iiij of Mawtebys armes and Sir Roger Beauchamp departed. And in myddys of the seid stoon I wull have a scochen sett of Mawtebys armes alone, and vnder the same thise wordes wretyn: "In God is my trust" (no. 230, 1: 383-4).

Margaret's instruction for the making of her tombstone, reverberating with the name of Mautby, shows how much she wanted to emphasize her connection to her father's family. Discussing the will and epitaph of a mercer who died in 1460, Julia Boffey suggests that medieval wills and testaments flatten out the individual features of the testators.⁴⁰

³⁸ For the quotations from Margaret's will, see Davis, no. 230, 1: 383-4.

³⁹ Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 9. Justice uses the word "taciturn" in his introduction to *Writing and Rebellion*, while explaining how to make sense out of apparently "taciturn" historical documents: "One assumption of this book is that taciturn records can be squeezed until they talk. But still, once squeezed, they can only say so much, and one of my persistent difficulties was deciding how far I should try to make the rebels live."

⁴⁰ Julia Boffey, "Middle English Lives," *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 610-11.

Although wills tell us more about the testators than an epitaph that could have been adopted from elsewhere, they were still composed by a clerk according to certain conventional forms and a trusted formula. But Margaret's meticulous writing allows this document to tell us vividly about her life— her aspirations, concerns, and the personality that we encounter in her numerous letters.⁴¹ Born a Mautby, an ancient and respected family of Norfolk, Margaret was welcomed as the bride of John Paston I. Agnes Paston's satisfaction with her future daughter-in-law is evident in her letter to her husband William Paston I, who had been desperate for the alliance between the two families: "Blyssyd be God, I sende yow gode tydynggys of þe coming and þe brynggyn hoom of þe gentylwomman þat ye made þer-for yowre-self. And as for þe furste aqweyntaunce betwene John Paston and þe seyde gentylwomman, she made hym gentil chere in gyntyl wyse and seyde he was verrayly yowre son" (no. 13, 1: 26). Agnes reveals her high hope for the alliance, wishing that both families could easily come to an agreement over the marriage settlement.

Margaret would have been one of the most desirable matches for John, since she brought with her not only money but also the social status and connections that the newly rising family was in urgent need. It was through Margaret that John Paston I became acquainted with Sir John Fastolf, an influential soldier and benefactor of the Pastons. Margaret was also related to the Berneys and Garneys through her mother Margery, daughter of John Berney of Reedham, who married Ralph Garney esq. after her husband

⁴¹ Richmond also points out that Margaret's will reflects her personality and circumstances; see *The Paston Family: Endings*, 122. Margaret's will takes on importance as an example illustrating how documentary culture shaped the mentality of the Pastons. Her will has never been discussed in scholarly works except in Richmond's, whose insightful reading of the will throws new light on our understanding of her character. For Margaret's religious attitudes, her relationship with the Pastons, and concerns for the poor illustrated in her will, see *The Paston Family: Endings*, 122-127.

John Mautby's death. As Richmond notes, Margaret's first meeting with John Paston I must have been a "momentous encounter in the Pastons' history" since their alliance strengthened the Pastons' place in Norfolk society.⁴² With Margaret's name and connections the Pastons were able to minimize their low origins and establish themselves as a family of true gentility.⁴³

Margaret's will reveals, however, that she rarely cared for the name of Paston. As Richmond observes, Margaret was the last of the Mautbys; the first part of her will relates her awareness of being so.⁴⁴ Margaret preferred to be known as a Mautby rather than as a Paston and tried throughout her life to defend her Mautby inheritance – and Gresham, her jointure – from the grasping hands of local magnates. The tomb inscribed all over with the escutcheons of the families of Mautby and Berney, her mother's family, exhibits Margaret's pride in her lineage and deep attachment to the name of her father. Margaret even sealed the copy of her will with the coats of Mautby and of Berney only, clarifying her desire to be recognized as a Mautby, not a Paston.⁴⁵

Margaret's use of her will mirrors the late medieval attitude towards writing. According to Duby, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries writing was associated with a concern that heirs inherit spiritual capital, precepts, and morals.⁴⁶ Information of a private nature was preserved so that it might be passed on to posterity. Perhaps Margaret

⁴² Richmond, *The Paston Family: The First Phase*, 134.

⁴³ On the origins of the Pastons and the significance of the marriage between Margaret and John Paston I, see Richmond, *The Paston Family: The First Phase*, 1-23 and 117-134, respectively.

⁴⁴ Richmond, *The Paston Family: Endings*, 122-23.

⁴⁵ See Davis's headnote for Margaret's will in *The Paston Letters*, 383.

⁴⁶ Duby, *A History of Private Life*, 549.

believed that the defunct Maubys would live again and be remembered forever in her will, the final written document from her that would be preserved and read by her children. In so doing, Margaret recorded, published, and preserved a document of her personal history.⁴⁷

Margaret articulates her idea of writing in one of her letters to John Paston II: “3e thynke þat I xuld wryte to þow fabyls and ymagynacyons. But I do not soo; I haue wrytyn as yt haue be enformed me, and wulle do” (no. 205, 1: 345-6). The letter was written in 1469 when the mother and son were in conflict, mainly due to John’s neglect of his duty as the eldest son. Margaret desired him to pay more attention to the family and the problem of Caister, the inheritance of Fastolf, which had been under siege by the Duke of Norfolk. Margaret blamed John Paston II for the death of John Daubeney and Osbern Berney, emphasizing that she would rather lose Caister than let people die for it (no. 204, 1: 344).⁴⁸ Noting in his reply that the people thought dead were in fact “on lyve and mery,” John defended the surrender of Caister and asked Margaret to send no false news in order to make him feel guilty and to pay attention to the situation at Caister: “moodre, I fele by yowre wryghtyng that ye deme in me I scholde not do my deuyre wyth-owt ye wrot to me some hevye tydyngys; and modre, iff I had need to be qwykynynd wyth a letter

⁴⁷ It seems possible that the elaborate instruction for the tombstone in Margaret’s will was intended to ensure its construction, especially since she saw how the construction of her husband’s tombstone had been delayed by the negligence of his heirs. Margaret well knew the function of a document that “enacts” something and gets something done. About the problem of John Paston I’s tombstone, see Margaret’s letter to John Paston II, written in 1471: “Yt is a schame, and a thyng þat is myche spokyn of in thys contré, þat 3owr faders graue ston is not mad. Fore Goddys loue, late yt be remembyrd and purveyed fore in hast – there hath be myche more spend in waste þan schuld haue mad þat” (no. 212, 1: 359). For the power of a document that “enacts” and gets something done, see Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 116.

⁴⁸ Both John Daubeney and Osbern Berney were relatives of the Pastons. John III described Daubney as “my cousin,” and John III called him “Sir.” Berney was grandson of the first John Berney of Reedham and Margaret Paston’s cousin. See *The Paston Letters and Papers*, lxxvi; and Davis ed., *The Paston Letters: A Selection*, 106, n.4.

in thys need I were of my-selfe to slawe a felaw” (no. 243, 1: 406).⁴⁹ John II wrote how much he had endeavored to rescue Caister and claimed that he never neglected his duty as the head of the family. Defending her previous communication by reconfirming that Daubeney had died, Margaret’s reply, quoted above, made it clear that her letters were always based on facts. For Margaret, writing meant a document, something that preserves and transmits information; something that transforms thoughts into action. There is no space in her letters for self-expression or “ymagynacyons.”

Margaret’s will exemplifies such an attitude toward writing. Particularly, the absence of any mention of books in her will suggests the impact of a documentary culture on her practice of reading and writing. Margaret was a prolific writer, scribbling “at any time and at all hours.”⁵⁰ Strange for such an inexhaustible writer, Margaret does not include any books in her will. Medieval testaments have been considered as one of the most important sources of information regarding female book ownership.⁵¹ Although the will’s formality and piety probably influenced the kind of books specified by a testator, medieval wills show that many upper class laywomen were great readers of secular as well as religious books and frequently bequeathed them to other female members of the

⁴⁹ John II’s letter to Margaret, written on September 15, 1469.

⁵⁰ Richmond, *The Paston Letters: Endings*, 92. According to Richmond, Margaret wrote on “Sundays; on saints’ days; on All Soules Day, Christmas Eve, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, and Holy Rood Day; to her husband on the same day ‘that ye departyd hens’ and again ‘at xj of the clok in the nyth the same day I departyd fro yow’; ‘by candel light at evyn’, ‘at ix of the belle at nyght’ and ‘at nyght, in hast’. ... And still she was not writing often enough, a very cross John had reprimanded her in August [1465]”; see Richmond, *The Paston Letters: Endings*, 92.

⁵¹ For studies of medieval women’s book ownership and their wills, see Carol Meale, “‘... alle the bokes that I haue of latyn, englisch, and frensch’: Laywomen and their Books in Late Medieval England,” *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. Carol Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge Univeristy Press, 1996), 128-58; Susan Groag Bell, “Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture,” *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 149-187.

family. According to Susan Croag Bell, the number of laywomen who owned books increased substantially in the fourteenth century and multiplied dramatically by the fifteenth century, indicating women's growing engagement with medieval written culture.⁵²

That Margaret did not include any books in her testament can be explained in several ways. Perhaps Margaret scarcely had an interest in books or simply forgot to mention them in her will. The absence also suggests her lack of interest in displaying spirituality since medieval testators often mentioned books – especially religious ones – in their wills in order to display their devotion.⁵³ Margaret made no bequest to nuns and convents except for a few local friaries at Norwich and Yarmouth. Margaret's spirituality was never profound; as Richmond aptly observes, it was as “decently middlebrow and as properly unexciting as fifteenth-century English spirituality could ever be.”⁵⁴

Most important, the omission of bequests of books shows that Margaret's literate practice was limited to documents. At the end of a long letter addressing numerous items of business and errands, John Paston I asked Margaret to “remembir and rede often my bille of erandes, and this lettir, till it be don” (no. 77, 1:144). He gave her directions that she “cross” out completed items on the bill so that she might “knowe hem from tho þat be not sped” (no. 77, 1:144). John I's letter was a document to which Margaret would refer frequently to accomplish what her husband desired.

Margaret's letter to her younger son John Paston III (29 October, 1466) evidences

⁵² Bell, “Medieval Women Book Owners,” 152.

⁵³ Richmond, *The Paston Family: Endings*, 125.

⁵⁴ Richmond, *The Paston Family: Endings*, 125.

how accurately she understood the purpose and power of a document:

And in alwyse I avyse you for to be ware that ye kepe wysly youre wrytyngys that ben of charge, that it com not in here handys that may hurt you hereafter. Youre fadere, wham God assole, in hys trobyll seson set more by hys wrytyngys and evydens than he dede by any of his moveabell godys. Remembere that yf tho were had from you ye kowd neuer gyte no moo such as tho be for youre parte, &c. (no. 198, 1: 333)

In this letter Margaret advised her son to safeguard his “writings” in order that they might not fall into the hands of his enemies. Although the Pastons’ struggles with the Duke of Suffolk and Lord Moleyns over the manors taught the family that the sword is sometimes mightier than the pen, Margaret believed in the value of written documents. She knew that even powerless “wrytyngys and evydens” could be dangerous once put in the hands of enemies.

Margaret’s letter to John Paston I, reporting her conversation with Barrow, one of Lord Moleyn’s men, also illustrates her command of documentary culture:

Barow told me that there ware no better evydens in Ingland than the Lord Moleyns hathe of the maner of Gressam. I told hym I sopposyd that they were seche evydens as Willyam Hasard seyde that 3wr were: he seyde the sellys of hem were not zett kold. I seyde I sopposyd his Lordys evydens were seche. I seyde I wost wele, as for 3owr evydens, there myt3 no man haue non better than 3e haue, and I seyde the selys of hem were to hundred 3ere elder than he is. (no. 132, 1:231)

The letter was written in 1449, when the Pastons and Lord Moleyns were involved in an on-going dispute over Gresham. Margaret claimed the Pastons’ right to the property by asserting that the seals on John’s document were more ancient than those of Lord Moleyns, whose seals were not yet “cold.” Margaret’s claim reveals the medieval “reverence for [a] documentary past” that Justice has discerned in the demands of rebels

during the English Rising of 1381.⁵⁵ According to Justice, a number of peasants from St. Albans went to the abbey and claimed their freedom from the abbot to gain the privilege of hunting and fishing in his warren. They brought to the abbot a royal writ commanding him to hand over “certain charters” concerning the liberties of the village. The abbot yielded to the demand of the tenants. Dissatisfied with the charter that the abbot handed over to them, however, the tenants burned it and then demanded the return of the charter of freedom that they believed King Offa had granted them some time in the past. The peasants asserted that this “ancient charter ... with capital letters, one of gold and one of azure” had been stolen by the monks and hidden somewhere in the abbey. The tenants’ demand for King Offa’s charter of freedom as well as Margaret’s emphasis on the antiquity of the Pastons’ right to the estate all testify to their reverence for ancient documents; the acts of Margaret and the tenants demonstrate their understanding of how a document functions and what attests its authority.

Trust in Writing

Writing and documents had a tremendous impact on the lives of Paston letter-writers. Even the most cursory look at the letters and papers collected in Davis’s edition shows how much the Pastons dedicated themselves to producing and preserving documents. The Pastons’ investment in documentary culture is captured vividly in Francis Blomefield’s letter, written right after his discovery of the Paston papers in the evidence-room of Oxnead:

⁵⁵ Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 47.

There are ten boxes of court-rolls, surveys, extent-books, deeds and other things material to the several manors. ... There are three trunks and chests full of the ancient and present title-deeds to the manors and estates, all which I carefully put together. There are two boxes of old leases only, which I laid by, not knowing but they might be of some service. ... There is another box full of the pardons, grants, and old deeds, freedoms, &c. belonging to the Paston family only ... there are innumerable letters, of good consequence in history, still lying among the loose papers, all which I laid up in a corner of the room on a heap, which contains several sacks full.⁵⁶

The boxes and boxes of documents and “several sacks full” of letters in the evidence-room attest to the Pastons’ passion for documentation and written records. The Pastons amassed a compilation of their family records despite the practical challenges they faced – such as the scarcity of paper. In fifteenth century England, paper was rare; all the paper used in this period was of foreign manufacture. The watermarks on the sheets of the Paston correspondences tell us that the family used paper made in France or northern Italy.⁵⁷ A postscript to one of Margaret’s letters says, “paper is deynty,” although it is hard to tell whether the words are from the scribe or Margaret herself (no. 142, 1: 244). The scarcity of paper, however, did not keep the Pastons from writing.

Describing how the gradual distribution of records throughout late medieval England “prepared and fertilized the ground in which literacy could germinate,” Clanchy emphasizes the educated laity’s contribution to the growth of documentary culture:

Through the spread of record-making the practice of using writing for ordinary secular business, as distinct from using it exceptionally for solemn religious or royal purposes, became first familiar and then established as a habit. Among the laity, or more specifically among

⁵⁶ For Blomefield’s letter, see Davis’s introduction to *The Paston Letters and Papers*, xxvi .

⁵⁷ H. S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England*, 126.

knights and country gentry in the first instance, confidence in the written record was neither immediate nor automatic. Trust in writing and understanding of what it could – and could not – achieve developed from growing familiarity with documents.⁵⁸

The Pastons typify the “practice of using writing” for mundane business among members of the “country gentry.” Not only the men who had been educated at a university but also women used writing in conducting the business of everyday life. William Paston I had a habit of scribbling on papers, and Agnes Paston wrote down her errands in memoranda.⁵⁹ Davis’s collection of the Paston letters includes draft messages, inventories of papers, books, stolen goods, and even a recipe.⁶⁰

Although John Paston I himself was not a prolific writer, he had a great passion for collecting the family’s letters and papers. The number of letters sent to and from John Paston I amounts to 400, comprising almost half of the letters collected in Davis’s edition. John functioned as the nodal point for the Pastons’ communication, receiving and providing information among friends and family; it is no surprise that after his death exchange of letters by family members began to dwindle. For John I, letters were documents that registered every moment of his life and needed to be kept for future reference. John’s passion for collecting historical documents began even before he reached the age of twenty.⁶¹ The earliest surviving letter addressed to him is the one written by John Gyn, probably before 1440, during John’s residence in Trinity Hall at

⁵⁸ M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972; 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 2.

⁵⁹ On William Paston I’s scribbling papers, see Davis’s head notes on letters no. 2 and 6. See also Richmond, *The Paston Family: The First Phase*, 64.

⁶⁰ The recipe belongs to Judge William Paston I. It was written in his own hand. See, no.7, 1:14.

⁶¹ H. S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England*, 103.

Cambridge University. Since John was at Trinity Hall when he was only fifteen or sixteen, we can assume that John was influenced by documentary culture early in his years.

John's preservation of letters and documents reveals his sensitivity to modes of documentary proof, as well as his historical consciousness and interest in contemporary politics. Some letters collected by John were documents of historical significance: a copy of a letter from Richard, duke of York to King Henry VI (no. 460A, 2: 49-50) and a copy of the letter from Lord Hungerford and Robert Whityngham to Margaret of Anjou (no. 646A, 2:252-53)⁶² were sent to and collected by John even though the content of these letters does not have any relevance to the interests of the Pastons.

John I's life-long association with the benefactor Sir John Fastolf, who constantly sought his advice and knowledge, seems to have furthered John's interest in news and documentary evidence. Fastolf had a strong desire for political news and was an avid collector of contemporary political material. His historical archive includes the Duke of Suffolk's letter to his son, written just before his own death, and the articles of Jack Cade's rebellion.⁶³ In a letter to John I, written fifteen years after the rebellion, John Payne recalled how he had risked his own life to get the articles Sir Fastolf had wanted.⁶⁴

⁶² In this letter, written on 30 August, 1461, Hungerford and Whityngham conveyed the news about the death of Charles VII of France, who was also the uncle of Queen Margaret. The Queen sent Hungerford and Whityngham to France to ask for his help against Edward, but Charles had died on 22 July 1461.

⁶³ Richmond, "Hand and Mouth: Information Gathering and Use in England in the Later Middle Ages," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1 (1988): 244-5.

⁶⁴ Davis, no. 692, 2: 313-4. John Payne's letter to John Paston I describes Jack Cade's rebellion of 1450. The account written fifteen years after the event retains the quality of historical writing and the documentary nature of medieval personal correspondences. The narrative surprises us with Payne's amazing memory, recalling every detail even after fifteen years.

As lawyers, the Pastons knew the value of written evidence better than anybody else. They also understood the limitations of written communication. As Clanchy reminds us, in medieval England people did not trust writing entirely as an adequate tool for communication and information storage.⁶⁵ From the twelfth century, when forgery of charters was the rule rather than the exception, most monasteries had tolerated forgery on a fairly high scale. John Paston was familiar with the medieval practice of forgery and used it for his advantage. Right before his death in 1444, William Paston I expressed his wish to leave some of his estates to John's younger brothers, William and Clement.⁶⁶ His intention was not embodied in his written will at his death, however, and John Paston I attempted to get his mother to alter his father's will, written two years before his death, to bequeath the manors of Sporle and Swainsthorp to him. Later, after the death of Sir Fastolf in 1459, John Paston I was accused of forging Fastolf's will in order to place Caister in his possession. John Paston I was well aware of the fact that the written document is powerful but at the same time "malleable."⁶⁷

The Pastons' understanding of the limitations of written communication finds expression in their promise of oral report. The letter writers often make excuses that they can not send a full report due to lack of "lysores" (no. 84, 1: 156). Writing to John Paston I about his conversation with William Yelverton, justice of the King's Bench, Thomas Playter apologized that "the cyrcumstans of oure talking were to long to wryte, and therfor I expresse the substauns as I conceive" (no. 88, 1:162). In her letter to John Paston I

⁶⁵ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 248-257. See also Jesse Gellrich, "Orality, Literacy, and Crisis in the Later Middle Ages," *Philosophical Quarterly* 67 (1988), 408-409; and Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, xiv and 248-292.

⁶⁶ See Agnes Paston's will in *The Paston Letters and Papers*, no. 31, 1:44.

⁶⁷ Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 48.

concerning the Duke of Suffolk's claim to Drayton and Hellesdon, Margaret Paston also wrote that "Pecoke shalle telle you be mouthe of more thyngys than I may write to you at þis tyme" (no.178, 1: 293). Margaret's letter shows her belief that spoken communication could give more immediacy and precision than written.

Written words were also dangerous. A 1471 letter of Margaret to John Paston III expresses her fear about communicating her thoughts in writing. Asking her younger son about the rumor that John Paston II had been poisoned to death, Margaret reminded John Paston III of Sir Robert Harcourt's death and advised him to beware of lords and their "simulation":

Th<ynk>e what gret sorrow it <shu>ld be to <m>e and any <...you>. I had leuer ye had neuer know þe lond. Remembre [Sir John Fastolf's land] was þe distruccion of your fader. Trost not mych vp-on promises of lordes now a days that ye shuld be the suerere of þe favour of þer men; for there was a man, and a lordes sone, seid but late and toke it for an exampill, þat Ser Roberd Harecourt had the good will of the lordes after þer coming in, and yet wyth-in short tyme after here men kylled hym in his owyn place. A mannes deth is litil set by now a days. Þerfore be ware of symulacion, for thei wull speke right fayr to you þat wuld ye ferd right evyll. ... Wretyn in gret hast the Saterdag next after sent Andrewe. Lete this letter be brent whan ye haue vnderstond it. (no.213, 1: 360-1).

A leading Yorkist from 1463, Harcourt was murdered by the bastard son of Sir Humphrey Stafford in 1470, when the "lords" restored Henry VI. Margaret wrote her letter during the period in which the two Paston brothers switched their loyalty from the Yorkists, whom the family had been supporting, to the Lancastrians. Margaret's advice was appropriate and showed her good judgment; but experience told her that written words could be intercepted and put her in danger. The letter therefore ends with her request to burn it.

Nevertheless, the Paston writers placed a strong trust in written documents and repeatedly claimed the validity and truth of the information such documents conveyed by emphasizing its written character. For instance, in March 1461, John Paston III wrote a letter to his servant Thomas Playter right before the battle of Towton. In his letter about Edward IV's proclamation calling on men to help the fight against the Lancastrian, John Paston III advised Playter to bring a written message instead of an oral one: "if ye shall bryng any masage from the lordes take wrytyng, for Dancortes massage is not verely beleved be-cause he browt no wrytyng" (no.317, 1:520). Thomas Playter was then staying in London with William Paston II, acting for John Paston I. The news of Edward IV's drafting of soldiers seems to have reached Norfolk even before this letter was written. But John Paston III wrote that the report of the mustering of troops was not trusted, since no writing from the lords had been presented when Dancortes brought the message.

John Paston III's request for a written message reveals his idea of writing as closely associated with political authority. The speech of Edward IV, quoted in Clement Paston's letter to his brother John I, articulates the late medieval association of writing with authority:

On the xj th day of October the Kinge seid, "We have sent two privy sealys to Paston by two yeomen of our chamber, and he disobeyeth them; but we will send him a-noder to-morrowe, and by Gods mercye and if he come not then he xall dye for it. We will make all oder men beware by him how they xall disobey our writinge. A servant of our hath made a complainte of him. I cannot thinke that he hath informed us all truly, yet not for that we will not suffer him to disobey our writinge; but sithen he disobeyeth our writinge we may beleve the better his gydinge is as we be informed" (no. 117, 1:200).

The king's consistent use of the word "writing" in place of "royal command" points to the status of writing as a representation of royal power in medieval England. Writing functioned as a medium through which the king exerted his will. The display of royal writ, a scene familiar to late medieval society, contributed to establishing the authority of the written word as a guarantee of truth.

The Pastons were well aware of what a written document "could and could not achieve."⁶⁸ The family's attempt to invent its pedigree with a written document exhibits their understanding of documentary power. John Paston II exerted tremendous effort to have Edward IV declare the gentility of the family. Two months after the death of John Paston I in 1466, John II would finally secure from the king a statement that the Pastons were "gentlemen descended lineally of worshipfull blood sithen the Conquest hither."⁶⁹ It was a fiction; but the Pastons saw the potential of a document that creates reality. Their knowledge about the nature of writing and documents empowered this fifteenth-century gentry family.

Epistolary Conversation

Since most male members of the family had to be away from home on business and other pursuits, the Pastons had to maintain and recognize familial bonds through the exchange of correspondence. The acquisition of new knowledge through epistolary communication among family members nurtured the Pastons' social and political

⁶⁸ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Records*, 2.

⁶⁹ Davis's introduction to *The Paston Letters and Papers*, xlii.

consciousness. On 11 December 1462, John Paston III sent to his brother John II the latest news of developments at the northern front and at court. John III asked his brother to pass on the news to other family members:

The kyng lythe at Durham and my lord of Norfolk at New-castyll: we have pepyll j-now her. ... I wot well ye haue more tydyngys than we haue her. But thes be trewe tydynges. I pray yow let my modyr haue knowelege ... I pray yow let my fadyr haue knowlage of thys lettyr and of the todyr lettyr þat I sent to my modyr by Felbryggys man, and how that I pray bothe hym and my modyr lowly of her blyssyngys. (no. 320, 1: 524)⁷⁰

John III observed that people in Norfolk might have more information than he was able to obtain. John knew well that in time of war, groundless rumor circulated and caused anxiety among people. His emphasis on the truth of his news, his “trewe tydynges,” communicated the urgency of transmitting accurate information. Letters were shared, passed around, and often read aloud, functioning as a venue through which the family members kept in touch with the outer world. John III’s repetitive “let [somebody] haue knowelege” effectively underscores the importance of receiving news and information.

C. A. J. Armstrong asserts that people in late medieval England placed an exceptional value on the dispatch of news. Current and first-hand information was crucial to members of the government not only because correct information was essential for the monarchy, but also because the English governing class depended on accurate news and informed assessment of the current political situation.⁷¹ Living under the constant threat

⁷⁰ When John III wrote this letter, Warwick was besieging the castles of Bamburgh, Alnwick, and Dunstanburgh, which had been in the hands of Margaret of Anjou since her invasion of Northumberland on 25 October 1462. John III was in the retinue of the duke of Norfolk, who was then staying at Holt Castle in Denbighshire.

⁷¹ C. A. J. Armstrong, “Some Examples of the Distribution and Speed of News in England at the Time of the Wars of the Roses,” *Studies in Medieval History Presented to Frederick Maurice Powicke*, ed. R. W. Hunt, W. A. Pantin, and R. W. Southern (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), 439.

of local magnates who attempted to possess the family manors, the Pastons knew that being acquainted with current events could empower them or, at least, protect them from changes of political power. On 1 March 1461 Margaret wrote to John, warning him of dangers if he returned to Norfolk: “Please it you to wytte that it is lete me witte by on þat owith you good wyll that þer is leid awayte up-on you in þis cuntré yf ye come here at large, to bring you to þe presence of suyche a lord in the north as shall not be for your ease, but to iopardie of your lyf or gret and importable losse of your goodes” (no. 158, 1: 264). Margaret wrote the letter when the “lord in the north,” i.e. allies of Margaret of Anjou, appeared likely to succeed. As supporters of Edward IV, the Pastons understood that the political situation would endanger John’s life as well as the Paston property. Margaret’s letter conveys the urgency of the moment.

Most of the letters Margaret wrote during the duke of Norfolk’s 1461 assault on Caister were concerned with the welfare of John Paston I. On 2 July she stated, “I pray yow hertely that ye woll send me word in hast howe that ye do wyth my lord of Norffolk and wyth your adversaryys” (no. 159, 1: 266). On 9 July she warned John to stay away from Norfolk for “nowgty and evyll desposyd felachepys” (no. 160, 1: 268). Another letter in 1461 warned John to be aware how “ye goo and ryde, for yt ys told me that ye be thret of hem that be nowtty felawys that hathe be inclynyng to them that hath be yowr hold adversaryys” (no. 163, 1: 270).

Getting information was particularly crucial to the moneyed class who had to run the household and maintain their property. Kingsford observes that John Paston I’s endeavor to keep his property and the Fastolf inheritance embroiled him and his sons in the stormy politics of the time: “It was the relationship of the family to Fastolf whilst he

was alive, and their claims to his estates when he was dead, which chiefly imparted to their correspondence more than a private and social interest.”⁷² The need for information to protect the property was not limited to the male members of the Paston family. In a letter to her son John Paston II, written right after the death of her husband John Paston I, Margaret emphasized that she should be informed of the procedure of inheritance so that she could be prepared for whatever might happen: “Item, I wold ye shold take hyde that yf any processe com owte a-yenste me, or a-yenst any of tho that were endyted a-fore the coronere, that I might haue *knowlych* therof and to purvey a remedy therefore” (no. 198, 1: 333).⁷³ The Pastons had to keep their ears open since even a slight change in the political circumstances would have an impact on their lives. For instance, John Paston I, who had been struggling with Lord Moleyns over Gresham from 1458, could secure the estate only when the Lord Moleyns was removed for political reasons.⁷⁴ The Pastons had every reason to pay attention to political information.

The letter was a textual space in which the Pastons and their friends communicated and around which their social activities were centered. It was also a space through which the Pastons voiced their opinions about political matters. A letter written by John Paston II on 18 April 1471 relates his fear about the development of the current political situation regarding the struggle over the throne. John II informs his mother of Edward’s regaining power at the battle of Barnet. Despite the family’s long connection

⁷² Kingsford, *English Historical Literature*, 199. For a complete discussion of John Paston’s effort to secure Fastolf’s inheritance and the consequent involvement with current politics, see Richmond, *The Paston Family: Fastolf’s Will*.

⁷³ Italics are mine.

⁷⁴ In 1452 Lord Moleyns, who had been fighting in France, was captured and imprisoned. He returned to England in 1459 only to engage himself with another war. This time he fought against the Lancastrian government and was eventually taken and beheaded.

with the Yorkists, the Paston brothers fought for the Lancastrians at this battle, and Edward IV's victory put their lives in jeopardy. Writing about conditions at the front, John Paston II advised his family to be careful of their "delyng ore langage as yit," since he was not sure how things would develop. John wrote that people "here feerythe it soore": "God hathe schewyd hym-selffe marvelouslye, lyke hym þat made all and can vndoo ageyn whan hym lyst; and I kan thynke þat by all lyklyod schall schew hym sylff as mervylous ageyn, and þat in schort tyme, and as I suppose offtere then onys in casis lyke" (no. 261, 1: 438). John II wrote this letter four days after the battle of Barnet. Although John believed that Edward IV would pardon the two Paston brothers' changing of coats, nothing could be predicted in such political chaos. John's mention of the "marvelous" acts of God expresses his mixed feelings of fear and hope – and frustration – about his situation.

Paston women writers also participated in the epistolary communication of political matters, voicing their opinions through letters. A 1462 letter to her husband exemplifies how Margaret recorded and conveyed her perspective about the current political situation:

Pepyll of this contré begynyth to wax wyld, and it is seyde her þat my lord of Clarans and the Dwke of Suthfolk and sertejn jwgys wyth hem schold come down and syt on syche pepyll as be noysyd ryotous in thys contré. ... In good feyth men fer sor her of a comone rysyng but if a bettyr remedy may be had to pese the pepyll in hast, and that ther be sent swyche downe to tak a rewyll as the pepyll hathe a fantsy in that wole be jndefere[n]t. They loue not in no wyse the Dwke of Sowthfolk nor hys modyr. (no.168, 1:279)

Margaret's letter well portrays the disturbing condition of Norfolk in 1462. Disgruntled voices and violence caused anxiety, and rebellion seemed imminent. Updating John on

the government's attempt to restore order, Margaret criticizes its incapacity to deal with popular discontent and expresses her opinion that somebody impartial should be dispatched to correct the situation. In the letter, Margaret speaks not only for herself but also for the common people of Norfolk; they hated the Duke of Suffolk and his wife, Alice Chaucer, supporters of all the traitors and extortionists of Norfolk. The letter concludes with Margaret's concern about economy ("for gadyryng of mony I sey nevyr a werse seson") and hope for a "good rewyll and a sad in thy contre" where robbery and manslaughter had never been so rampant. Margaret's account illustrates her sensitivity and good judgment about the situation of Norfolk.

Margaret conversed constantly with her neighbors and served as a mediator between her husband and the local people. In October 1460, she wrote a letter to John I while he was serving in parliament:

Ye have many good prayers of the poer pepyl that God schuld sped yow at thys parlement, for they leve in hope that ye schold helpe to set a wey that they myte leve in better pese in thys contré thane they have do befor, and that wollys schold be purveyed for that they schuld not go owt of thys lond as it hathe be suffryd to do be-fore: and thane schalle the poer pepyll moue leve bettyr thane they have do by her ocwpacion ther-in. (no.154, 1: 259)

In this letter, Margaret expresses her economical and political views, drawing on "many good prayers of the poer pepyl." She wrote this letter five days after Richard duke of York, in a statement to the lords in Parliament, "had challenged and claimed the said realm and crown of England, purposing without any more delay to have been crowned" on November 1.⁷⁵ Expressing high hopes for Warwick and a better world under the reign of Edward IV, Margaret articulates her anticipation of peace in Norfolk: "Ther is gret

⁷⁵ *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, 61, n. 4.

talking in thys contré of the desyir of my lorde of York. The pepyll reporte full wrochepfully of my lord of Warwyk. They have no fer her but that he and othyr scholde schewe to gret favor to hem that have be rewyllerys of thys contré be-for tyme” (no.154, 1:259).⁷⁶ As Richmond observes, the current “political and economic crisis had not gone unperceived by her, anymore than it had by those poor people.”⁷⁷ The letter communicates Margaret’s concern for the life of ordinary people. Her demand for peace and a stable livelihood, the “right thing to be done by a representative institution,” suggests that Margaret understood what the “poor” people really needed.⁷⁸

Margaret’s letter attests to the existence of a political community who shared their opinion on public matters; it also shows how an individual voiced her opinion in writing during the late Middle Ages. A lively conversation among local people on matters of government was channeled through Margaret’s correspondence to her husband in London. Margaret collected and recorded informal talk of people and presented it as public opinion in her letter. It is difficult to claim that Margaret’s views were unprejudiced, or that she communicated the consensus of people in Norfolk. The Pastons were supporters of Edward IV; Margaret’s report of “gret talking” of people must have been tainted with the Pastons’ political viewpoint. Margaret deployed her observation about the “talk” and “prayers of poor people” in order to present her political judgment in

⁷⁶ A supporter of York, Warwick had been attainted of treason at the Coventry parliament on 20 November 1459. When the Duke of York challenged the throne, Warwick was leading the Yorkist lords assembled in London.

⁷⁷ Richmond, *The Paston Family: Endings*, 117.

⁷⁸ Richmond, *The Paston Family: Endings*, 117. Richmond comments that Margaret was “thinking out of her class, and probably not thinking like her political husband” (118). Margaret’s concern for ordinary people is remarkable. Margaret’s will tells us how much Margaret felt compassion toward the poor. Specifying charity to the poor was a convention in medieval wills. But Margaret was exceptionally considerate of “poor people” and her own tenants, especially when we consider that she did not leave much for her own children; see Margaret’s will in *The Paston Letters and Papers*, no. 230, 1: 382-89.

the form of public opinion. When describing the situation of Norfolk, Margaret did not borrow the voices of common people.

By writing down the news she gathered and sending it to her husband, Margaret Paston participated in an on-going conversation about the political situation in mid-fifteenth century England. Noting medieval women's use of writing for running the household and managing business, Finke asserts that late medieval letters do not support "a distinction between a public realm of business affairs dominated by men and a private domain of emotion and sentiment presided over by women, a distinction that more readily distinguishes women's letters from men's in later centuries."⁷⁹ Margaret's letter expressing her compassion towards common people and her criticism of the government similarly blurs such a distinction. In a 1450 letter to John Paston I reporting local developments in England's long war with France, Margaret stated:

There ben many enmys azens Bermowth and Cromere, and haue don moche harm and taken many Englysch-men and put hem in grett destresse and grettely rawnsommyd hem, and the seyde enmys ben so bolde that they kom vp to þe lond and pleyn hem on Caster sondys and in othere plases as homely as they were Englysch-men. Folkys ben rytz sore aferd þat they wol don moche harm þis somer but if þer be made rytz grett purvyans azens hem. (no. 136, 1: 237-8)

Reporting about French invasions at Yarmouth and Cromer, Margaret notes that people lived in fear in the absence of proper governmental actions. Conveyed right after the news about the Duke of Suffolk, who was "right well at ease and merry" after being pardoned by the king, Margaret's comment on the plunder criticizes the inefficient government that could not protect its own people.

⁷⁹ Finke, *Women's Writing in English*, 117.

The letter served as a medium for communication among the letter-writers and a channel through which the Pastons received new ideas and knowledge. Discussing the function of the county court in fourteenth-century England, Maddicott shows how provincial gathering spaces such as dinner parties and market-places served as nodes for communication networks.⁸⁰ The information flowing in and through those places had a social impact on the formulation of public opinion and the growth of political consciousness among common people. Although Maddicott does not refer to personal correspondence as an important source of information and a node of communication, the Paston Letters demonstrate that the information channeled through the letters contributed to the development of the Pastons' political and social consciousness by constantly making them aware of current affairs. Letters were shared, passed around, and often read aloud, functioning as a venue through which the Pastons kept in touch with outer world.

Conclusion

In 1461, William Paston II wrote to his brother John Paston I a letter announcing Edward IV's victory at the battle of Towton:⁸¹

Please you to knowe and wete of suche tydyngys as my lady of York hath by a lettre of credens vnder the signe manuel of oure sourayn lord Kyng Edward, whiche lettre cam vn-to oure sayd lady this day, Easterne Evyn, at xj clok, and was sene and red be me, William Paston. Fyrst, oure

⁸⁰ J. R. Maddicott, "The County Community and the Making of the Public Opinion in Fourteenth-Century England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 28 (1978): 36-43.

⁸¹ William's letter was written right after the battle of Towton, fought on Palm Sunday, 29 March, 1461.

souerayn lord hath wonne the feld, and vppon the Munday next after
Palme Sunday he was resseyued in-to York with gret solempnyté and
processyonz. And the maire and comons of the said cité mad ther menys to
haue grace be Lord Montagu and Lord Barenars, whiche be-fore the
Kynngys coming in-to þe said citée desyred hym of grace for þe said citée,
whiche graunted hem grace. (no. 90, 1: 165)

William's letter illustrates many aspects of the Paston letters that I have discussed in this chapter. First, William's letter demonstrates that some of the functions later performed by early newsletters and newspapers and still performed by the press were in the fifteenth century performed by letters.⁸² William Paston II and Thomas Playter were staying in London at that time, and one of their important duties was to convey to John Paston I the news of the current political situation. In this letter William includes the list of men killed in the battle of Towton and reports that King Henry VI, Queen Margaret, the Dukes of Somerset and of Exeter, and Lord Roos had been defeated and had fled into Scotland. News of national affairs was transmitted through personal correspondences— in this case, Edward IV's letter to his mother Cecily, Duchess of York; the letter was then distributed publicly so that William himself could see and read it. William's own letter also circulated among his family members: "We pray you that this tydyngys my moder may knowe." By conveying reliable news of the front from London to Norfolk, William keeps his family members informed of current affairs. The exchange of news and contact with

⁸² Taylor, "Letters and Letter-Collections in England," 70. The layout of the first newspapers published in the seventeenth century features the intersection between the public and private, suggesting some connection between late medieval personal correspondence and the development of newspapers. London printers of newspapers regularly left space at the end of the third page of their paper for use by customers who might wish to add written communications when they sent the newspapers to friends or relatives in the country. These papers often included a blank page so that the paper might be folded and addressed like an ordinary letter; see, R. M. Wiles, *Freshest Advice: Early Provincial Newspapers in England* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1965), 8. Hasty communications scrawled in the margins of some other London newspapers show that personal postscripts were commonly added even when the printers did not provide space for the purpose.

the outer world expanded the Pastons' social consciousness and promoted their participation in public political discourse.

Second, the letters of both William Paston II and Edward IV, quoted in William's letter, exhibit the documentary nature of personal correspondence. William states that the news came from a "letter of credens vnder the signe manuel of oure sourayn lord Kyng Edward." He specifies the time that the Lady of York had received Edward's letter and declares that the letter "was sene and red be me, William Paston." William emphasizes that his report was based on eyewitness experience, that he in fact had seen and read Edward's letter. His name "William Paston," spelled out explicitly at the beginning of the letter reveals his intention to corroborate the validity of his information, by affirming that he himself testifies to its truth.⁸³

In the Middle Ages, news was usually transmitted by word of mouth. But from the fifteenth century, with the growing importance of writing in social life, people mobilized the epistolary genre and transformed it into a public medium. The Paston letters are basically written records of oral speech. Noting the "colloquialism" of the Paston letters, Watt claims that their simple informal style attests to the writers' awareness of medieval rhetoric, which recommended "plain" prose for general household correspondence; the letters show that the Paston letter-writers were not "self-conscious when writing or dictating and as a result, their writing style resembled more closely their every-day speech."⁸⁴ The letters' oral elements, however, should be considered as

⁸³ The emphasis on personal and immediate experience, the urge to record personally verified history, is evident even in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century historical writing. For instance, the chronicles of Froissart and Adam Usk exhibit an urge to verify their record on the basis of their immediate political experience; see Andrew Galloway, "Writing History in England," *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 272-75.

⁸⁴ Watt, " 'No Writing for Writing's Sake' ," 131-133.

representing the writers' endeavor to validate their information by presenting it as an eye-witness account. Richard Firth Green has noted the "residual orality" in late medieval English culture and claimed that the "vitality of the older modes of social discourse" continued despite the growth of written culture.⁸⁵ The colloquialism of the Paston letters bears witness to a culture undergoing the transition from oral to written. The Pastons were "self-conscious" writers and consciously tried to put their information in writing; they used letters to "exercise powers of observation and express their ideas."⁸⁶ Yet they drew on the immediacy of oral speech to validate the written record, thereby negotiating "between the oral and literate modes of discourse."⁸⁷

Challenging Habermas's thesis that the published word was the distinguishing mark of the new domain of the public sphere and that medieval and early-modern political culture knows no concept of a public domain, Wendy Scase argues that the practice of bill-casting in late medieval England is relevant to a "revised and nuanced understanding of early political discourse and in particular to understanding the discursive roles of publicness and publication."⁸⁸ Although the emergence of a public sphere became most visible with the introduction of print culture and the rise of journalism, particularly the newspaper, it had its origins in the manuscript culture of late Middle Ages in which people posted bills and ballads in public places and exchanged

⁸⁵ Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, xiv.

⁸⁶ Whyman, "The Post-Restoration Letter," 21.

⁸⁷ Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, xiv.

⁸⁸ Wendy Scase, "'Strange and Wonderful Bills': Bill-Casting and Political Discourse in Late Medieval England," *New Medieval Literatures*, ed. Rita Copeland, Davis Lawton, and Wendy Scase (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 227.

news through letters. Produced in a period marked by an increased use of writing for public communication, personal correspondences of fifteenth-century England contributed to the creation of a bourgeois public sphere by circulating information, enlightening people, and promoting their political consciousness. Actively participating in on-going epistolary communication, the newly emerging literate laity could establish themselves as a critical reading public that eventually developed into a potent political power in English society.

CHAPTER 2: Counterfeit Correspondence

Documentary Manipulations and Textual Consciousness in Gloucester's Confession and *The Man of Law's Tale*

... a text can be powerful without being true.
-- Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow* –

Gloucester's Confession/ Donegild's Letters

In September, 1397, Richard II opened the parliament at Westminster and sought revenge against the Lord Appellants who had humbled him during the Merciless Parliament of 1388.¹ By 1397, the king's political situation was quite reversed from that of 1388. The position of the king was immeasurably stronger than it had been ten years previously: the three senior Appellants – Richard Fitzalan earl of Arundel, Thomas Beauchamp earl of Warwick, and Thomas Woodstock duke of Gloucester – had been politically marginalized. The time had come to strike back. On 10 July, Richard II arrested the lords without warning. Warwick was seized at the end of a banquet held by the king as a ruse. Arundel was persuaded to surrender himself by his brother, Thomas Arundel archbishop of Canterbury. Gloucester was then lying ill at Pleshy; according to the Monk of Evesham, Richard and his forces set out in the middle of the night to arrest the duke and

¹ My account of the historical events in 1388 is greatly indebted to the studies of Matthew Giancarlo and Nigel Saul; see Giancarlo, "Murder, Lies, and Storytelling: The Manipulations of Justice(s) in the Parliaments of 1397 and 1399," *Speculum* 77 (2002): 76-112; and Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997) 366-404. See also Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution: 1397-1400, The Reign of Richard II* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 54-83 and J. Tait, "Did Richard II Murder the Duke of Gloucester?" *Historical Essays by Members of the Owens College Manchester*, ed. T. F. Tout and J. Tait (1902): 193-216.

secretly sent him to be imprisoned at Calais, “disregarding the grief, tears and prayers with which the duchess his wife and the whole of the duke’s household entreated [Richard].”² Two months later in September, the three lords were put on trial in parliament. The pardons of the Lord Appellants were repealed; Arundel was tried for treason and finally beheaded; Warwick was banished for life to the Isle of Man. Gloucester was already dead by the time he was ordered to appear. The cause and the exact date of his death remain unknown, although contemporary chroniclers generally agree that the duke had been murdered and that the king himself had been deeply involved in the crime.³ Gloucester was posthumously condemned for treason; and a document was presented to justify the sentence.

This document, allegedly made by the duke himself before his death, is Gloucester’s own confession of various offences he had committed during the struggle between the king and the Lord appellants. Here the duke confessed that he had slandered the king and assented to the making of a Commission to restrain the king’s freedom and usurp royal power; the document also disclosed Gloucester’s armed procession into the king’s presence, the interception and unauthorized opening of royal letters, the duke’s surrendering homage to the king and the countenancing of the other Lord Appellants’ plan to depose the king. One of numerous documents produced during the remarkable period between the Merciless Parliament of 1388 and the final deposition and death of

² *Historia Vitae et Regni Ricardi Secundi*, ed. G. B. Stow (1977), 137. For the citation, I use Given-Wilson’s translation in *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 54.

³ The author of *Continuatio Eulogii* claims that Richard II himself ordered Thomas Mowbray, the earl of Nottingham, “under threat of death,” to kill the duke. The earl went to Calais and some of his followers “secretly and wickedly suffocated the duke by smothering him with a featherbed, letting it be known that he had died of natural causes.” *Continuatio Eulogii: Eulogium Historiarum Sive Temporis*, ed. F. S. Haydon, vol. III (Rolls Series 1863), 371-9. The details of the duke’s death by “featherbed” were publicly divulged in the Parliament of October 1399. See Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 15 and 65.

Richard II in 1400, Gloucester's confession marks a complete shift in political power during the Revenge Parliament of 1397, the year that Richard "began to tyrannize" people.⁴ Of interest here, however, is not so much the content of Gloucester's confession or its historical significance, but the ways that Richard used this document to serve his purposes. According to Walsingham and the monk of Evesham, on 8 September 1397 Richard II ordered William Rickhill, a justice of the Common Bench, to go to Calais for an interview with the duke.⁵ Rickhill arrived in Calais castle at eight a.m. and explained his commission to the duke. He told the duke that if there was anything he wished to say to the king, he should put it in writing. Rickhill left the duke and returned at 9 p.m. of the same day. The duke then gave his written confession to Rickhill "with his own hands" after reading it out "in person."⁶ When Rickhill asked him if he wished to add to the confession, Gloucester said that there was one matter that he had only remembered after writing the confession. He had said to the king that if he wished to be a king, he should stop begging to save the life of Simon Burley. The duke asked Rickhill to explain this to the king by "word of mouth."⁷ The confession was delivered to the king on 16 September, and then read out by Rickhill himself before Parliament.

When writing this statement, the duke seems to have in mind Richard's July 15 proclamation that the three lords had been arrested because of warnings of a plot against

⁴ In a famous passage of his chronicle *Annales Ricardi Secundi*, Thomas Walsingham reports that in the summer of 1397 the king "began to tyrannise and burden his people with great loans." See Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 71.

⁵ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 54-63 and 70-77.

⁶ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 82.

⁷ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 83.

him and not for their actions during the Merciless Parliament of 1388.⁸ According to the author of the *Traison et Mort*, the duke in collaboration with Arundel had begun to hatch a plot against the king early in 1397; but Richard was informed of their conspiracy and decided to thwart it by arresting the duke and his accomplices.⁹ The story in *Traison et Mort* cannot be accepted as it stands since no evidence was submitted in the Parliament to charge the Lord Appellants with treason. The plot could have been fabricated by Richard to exact revenge on the duke and other Lord Appellants. Had there been no plot, Richard nevertheless had reason to suppose that there might be one. The status of the Lord Appellants in the court had conspicuously weakened since Richard repeatedly refused to adopt their advice in important political decisions. Richard's relations with the Lord Appellants had become tense by the spring and early summer of 1397, when rumors of treasonous plots circulated. The duke was aware of the king's suspicion; at one point in the confession the duke denied his involvement in any treasonous plots since he had reconciled with the king at Langley in 1388: "As to any new matter or agreement that I might be aware of, or have ordained or assented to, whether secretly or openly, that is directed against my lord's estate, or his power, or any of those about his person, I swear, by the oath that I swore to him upon God's body at Langley that, ever since the day that I took that oath to him, I have not been aware of any gathering directed against either him

⁸ The proclamation states that the three lords were arrested "for the great number of extortions, oppressions, grievances etc. committed against the king and people, and for other offences against the king's majesty, which shall be declared in the next parliament, and not for the assemblies and ridings" occasioned by the uprising of 1387 and 1388; *Calendar of Close Rolls 1396-9*, 208. See also Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 73.

⁹ *Chronique de la Traison et Mort de Richard II*, ed. B. Williams (London, 1846), 117-21; quoted in Saul, *Richard II*, 371.

or any others about his person.”¹⁰ By asserting his innocence in “recent offenses,” the duke might have attempted to save his life.¹¹

Gloucester did not realize, however, that what Richard wanted was neither the truth nor his repentance. The king desperately needed evidence to justify his indictment against the duke and solidify his claim to Gloucester’s forfeited estates and holdings. The duke’s appearance in Parliament had to be avoided at all costs since his eloquence might make a favorable impression on his listeners. By securing and then manipulating the written confession, Richard could accomplish his end while conveniently silencing the voice of the duke. Richard removed the duke’s claim of innocence in “recent offenses” along with another part of the confession that speaks of the duke’s regret for the earlier crimes.¹² When reading the confession before the parliament, Rickhill also left out the parts in which the duke pled for mercy and claimed his loyalty to the king, so that the document could emphasize the duke’s treacherous actions.

I began this chapter with a discussion of Gloucester’s Confession since the ways that Richard exploited this written document are important for understanding Chaucer’s

¹⁰ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 81. As to the incident at Langley, the “Record and Process” registers that the king “willingly” issued charters of pardon to the Lord Appellants: “in the eleventh year of King Richard’s reign, in the chapel of his manor at Langley, in the presence of the dukes of Lancaster and York and many other lords, the king, openly expressing the wish that his uncle the duke of Gloucester, also present there, should have faith in his good intentions, swore of his own volition upon the holy sacrament of the Lord’s Body which had been placed upon the *altar* there, that he willingly and entirely pardoned the duke of Gloucester for any offences which he might have been said to have committed against the king’s person, and that he would never try on that account to condemn or harm him. Later, however, notwithstanding this oath, the king ordered the aforesaid duke to be cruelly and horribly murdered for these alleged offences, thus damnably committing perjury”; see Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 182-83. This Lancastrian version of the deposition of Richard II emphasizes the king’s duplicity by asserting that he murdered Gloucester for the offenses during the Merciless Parliament of 1388, thereby betraying his own words.

¹¹ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 73.

¹² For the part that the duke stated his regret and pled for mercy, see Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 82. Given-Wilson indicates with brackets the parts that were left out in the public reading.

The Man of Law's Tale. Particularly, this historical incident of 1397 is strongly reminiscent of the episode in *The Man of Law's Tale* in which Donegild intercepts and forges royal letters. In his confession, the duke writes that he intercepted Richard's letters and used them to threaten him: "Also, in that I took my lord's letters from his messengers, and opened them against his leave, I acknowledge that I did evil; wherefore I submit myself humbly to his grace."¹³ Contemporary chronicles attest to frequent interception and unauthorized opening of royal letters during the reign of Richard. The author of the *Westminster Chronicle* registers that in 1387 Gloucester and the other Lord Appellants seized Richard's diplomatic letters to France to accuse him of wanting to call on the French king to procure their destruction.¹⁴ The king's private correspondence was not secure either; according to Adam Usk, Robert de Vere, one of the five "traitors" accused of treason by Gloucester, Arundel, and Warwick in 1387, fled to Cheshire "bearing royal letters" to raise an army on behalf of the king. Following de Vere's defeat at Radcot Bridge, Richard's letters urging him to take measures against the Lord Appellants fell into the hands of the opponents. When the Lords met the king at the Tower of London, to which Richard had retreated to await his fate, they showed him the correspondence with de Vere. Just as Richard did with Gloucester's confession, the Lords also employed these letters for political purposes: they reproached the king for treachery, demanded the arrest and imprisonment of five appellees with threat of deposition, and charged de Vere with treason during the Merciless Parliament.¹⁵

¹³ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 81.

¹⁴ Saul, *Richard II*, 189 and *The Westminster Chronicle 1381-1394*, ed. L. C. Hector and B. F. Harvey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 266-8.

¹⁵ Thomas Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, ed. H. T. Riley (2 vols, Roll series, 1863-4), ii. 169. See also *The Chronicle of Adam Usk 1377-1421*, ed. and trans. Given-Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 11.

In *The Man of Law's Tale*, enraged at her son Alla's marriage to a "strange creature" (697-700) and conversion to Christianity, Donegild conspires to destroy Custance by exchanging letters. While Alla is away campaigning against the Scots, Custance gives birth to a beautiful son, Mauricius. The king's constable sends a joyful message informing his lord of the birth of a prince, but Donegild intercepts the message while the king's messenger sleeps, intoxicated with the drinks she has offered. Donegild replaces the true letter with a false one conveying dreadful news:

The letter spak the queene delivered was
Of so horrible a feendly creature
That in the castel noon so hardy was
That any while dorste ther endure.
The mooder was an elf, by aventure
Ycomen, by charmes or by sorcerie,
And every wight hateth hir compaignye. (750-756)

The counterfeit letter informs the king that the child is a "feendly creature" and that his mother has turned out to be an elf. Donegild's story is a fiction, a falsified version of what really happened. But her written message is still powerful enough to make Alla believe in its sincerity. Although disappointed, the king replies that he will keep the child "al be it foul or feir" if such a birth is God's will. Donegild again intercepts the king's reply to the constable and sends instead a counterfeit one commanding banishment of the prince and his mother.

Donegild's offenses are presented in a highly political context. In her essay on the Man of Law as the "voice of patriarchy," Carolyn Dinshaw writes that the "mannish" (782) actions of both mothers-in-law in the tale show their desire to appropriate

patriarchal power through manipulations of language.¹⁶ The Sowdanesse, Custance's first mother-in-law, demands a verbal act of fealty from her followers (344-347), while Donegild exchanges written letters. Although Dinshaw emphasizes the threat to patriarchy posed by the mothers-in-law, her statement also points to the importance of language for exercising power in real politics. The actions of both mothers-in-law are politically charged. The Sowdanesse resents her son's conversion to Christianity and desires to protect her old religion: "The lyf shal rather out of my body sterte/ Or Makometes lawe out of myn herte!" (335-336).¹⁷ As for Donegild, the Man of Law's use of such words as "tirannye" (779) and "traitorie" (781) in his commentary on her forgery suggests the political dimension of her crime. Donegild knows how written texts could be manipulated as powerful political instruments. Gloucester's interception of royal letters and Richard II's use of Gloucester's confession offer strong subtexts to Donegild's actions.

A direct link between Gloucester's confession and *The Man of Law's Tale* cannot be established since Chaucer scarcely mentions any current historical event in this poem. Even the exact date of this tale's composition is uncertain: although earlier scholars believed *The Man of Law's Tale* was an early composition, most scholars now agree that Chaucer's use of Innocent III's *De miseria* and of John Gower's *Confessio amantis* in the tale indicates its composition around 1390. Most recently, Robert E. Lewis assigns it to

¹⁶ Carolyn Dinshaw, "The Law of Man and its 'Abhomynacions,'" *Exemplaria* 1 (1989): 132.

¹⁷ The political motive of the Sowdanesse's actions is particularly clear when we compare Chaucer's tale of Custance to Gower's in *Confessio Amantis* where Gower explains her motive as "Envie"; see John Gower, *Confessio Amantis* in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, 4 vols., ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), Book II, 641.

the period from about 1390 to 1394-95.¹⁸ A composition date of 1395 makes it difficult to claim that *The Man of Law's Tale*, particularly the scene in which Donegild intercepts and forges royal letters, was modeled after a historical event that took place in 1397.

But as Jesse Gellrich observes, the use – or abuse – of written documents figures prominently in records about late fourteenth-century political struggles, providing a salient context for analyzing the documentary manipulation of Chaucer's tale.¹⁹ John of Gaunt, for instance, forged a chronicle in order to claim his son Henry as the legitimate heir to the throne.²⁰ Taking note of Richard's childlessness, Gaunt concocted the story that Edmund Crouchback, the second son of Henry III, was in fact his first son and the legitimate heir who was held back in favor of the future Edward I because of his crooked back. Henry III then created Edmund the duke of Lancaster and planned that his heirs should reign after Edward I. The duke of Lancaster was the great-grandfather of Duchess Blanche, Gaunt's wife and Henry IV's mother. In an attempt to authenticate his story, Gaunt placed the forged chronicle in diverse abbeys and friaries; he even submitted it to the parliament of 1394. The whole story was a fabrication, but Gaunt's act suggests that he was keenly aware of the "value of textualization," the notion that a written document "placed in the right kind of circulation can generate its own kind of historical truth."²¹

¹⁸ On the dating of the tale, see the explanatory note in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 875.

¹⁹ Jesse Gellrich, *Discourse and Dominion in the Fourteenth Century: Oral Contexts of Writing in Philosophy, Politics, and Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 151-3.

²⁰ For John of Gaunt's forged legend of Edmund the Crouchback, see Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 77-78; and *England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation 1399-1422* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 3-6.

²¹ Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 82.

The thirty-three articles of Richard's deposition in 1399 also illustrate an understanding of the value of written records that reverberates in *The Man of Law's Tale*: according to the articles, Richard was "variable and dissimulating in both word and letter ... in his dealings with the pope, and with kings, and with lords and others both within and beyond his own kingdom, that virtually no living person ... could or wished to trust him." The king destroyed "the rolls containing the records of his estate and government of the kingdom ... in order to sustain and preserve his evil rule." He also ordered "the rolls of Parliament to be erased and altered" at his pleasure in order to legitimize his dealings with parliamentary petitions. The twenty-first article states that the king issued "sealed documents," commonly referred to as "blank charters" in order to "subject his people and acquire their goods by craft, so that he would gain great wealth." Richard forced the "people of seventeen counties of the realm to submit themselves to the king as traitors by letters under their seals." By this device the king obtained "great sums of money from both the clergy and the people of those shires, which they granted to him in order to secure his favor."²² Most of the accusations against Richard in the articles focus on how the king had arrogated the written law of the land to exploit his people.

This chapter examines the political appropriation of written authority implicated in Gloucester's confession and *The Man of Law's Tale*.²³ I explore contemporary

²² *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, ed. J. Strachey et al., 6 vols (London: 1783), vol. 3, 415-53. I rely on Given-Wilson for the translation of the articles; see *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 172-84. See also Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 245. Although the Lancastrians severely attacked the abuses of the literate machinery of law by Richard and his judiciary during the process of deposition, Henry IV learned from Richard that writing could be an effective instrument of governance and appropriated it for legitimating the usurpation of power. For the discussion of documentary manipulations during the reign of Henry IV, see Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 63-100.

²³ Studies on *The Man of Law's Tale* have scarcely paid attention to questions of writing and written authority. Except for the investigations of textual problems in *The Man of Law's Tale*, critics have mostly

attitudes toward writing as well as concerns about problems that accompanied written communications. According to M. T. Clanchy, over time English royal government extended its use of writing, and this in turn forced English people to participate in literacy. Already in 1300 the English were remarkably document-minded, as laymen began to convey property to each other by charter and even serfs were familiar with documents.²⁴ Both Gloucester's Confession and *The Man of Law's Tale* document the increased importance of writing in late fourteenth century England. But these texts also bear witness to the problems caused by the ambiguous status of writing in a process of cultural change. The advancement of written modes of communication proceeded haltingly, and even with reversals. A modern literate person tends to assume that written statements are more reliable than spoken words. This assumption is the result of education in reading and writing from an early age and the constant use of documents for even the smallest transactions. The obvious advantage of documentary proof to a modern

focused on exploring the saint-like character of Custance or shortcomings of the Man of Law. For representative discussions of Custance, see Sheila Delany, "Womanliness in a *The Man of Law's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 9 (1974): 63-72; and Eugene Clasby, "Chaucer's Constance: Womanly Virtue and the Heroic Life," *Chaucer Review* 13 (1978-79): 221-33. On the Man of Law himself, see Chauncey Wood, "Chaucer's Man of Law as Interpreter," *Traditio* 23 (1967): 149-90; and Walter Schepes, "Chaucer's Man of Law and the Tale of Constance," *PMLA* 89 (1974): 285-95. Recent studies show more diversified approaches to this tale. R. A. Shoaf argues that Custance symbolizes an ideal "sign" or medium for the Man of Law, who fears the "flow of things, of media, be they money or women or words"; see "'Unwemmed Custance': Circulation, Property, and Incest in *The Man of Law's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 2 (1990): 65-84. Don-John Dugas's essay considers the relationship between the teller and tale in the context of Richard II's reign and reads this story as an account of the basis for the monarch's right to rule by one of the twelve highest-ranking legal experts in England; see "The Legitimization of Royal Power in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," *Modern Philology* 95 (1997): 27-43. Maura Nolan also considers the suitability of tale and teller, focusing on the confrontation between legal and poetic discourses in the "Introduction" to the tale; "'Acquiteth yow now': Textual Contradiction and Legal Discourse in the Man of Law's Introduction," *The Letter of the Law: Legal Practice and Literary Production in Late Medieval England*, ed. Candance Barrington and Emily Steiner (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 136-53. Susan Schibanoff's work on "orientalism" argues that the Man of Law tells the story of the Muslims in order to facilitate the creation of Christian fraternity; see "Worlds Apart: Orientalism, Antifeminism, and Heresy in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 8 (1996): 59-96.

²⁴ M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972; 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 231. See also C. F. Briggs, "Literacy, Reading, and Writing in the Medieval West," *Journal of Medieval History* 26 (2000): 403.

literate person is that it cannot be as easily or as readily changed as a person's word. But the advantage of writing was less obvious in medieval England, since even literates did not use documents in the ways that assured their effectiveness as proof. For instance, William Rickhill himself reveals his doubt after the "colloquium" with the duke of Gloucester by asking for an "exemplification" – an officially registered copy – of the confession in case of some documentary falsification.²⁵ Rickhill's request is comprehensible since each of the confession's extant copies tells a different version of the event.²⁶

My reading of *The Man of Law's Tale* in this chapter first demonstrates how tightly the Man of Law's performance is constructed around the importance of writing and documents. My discussions of the tale's references to writing illuminate the textual mentality of a narrator deeply invested in written culture. Since the Man of Law himself is a master of documentation, he understands anxieties and tensions attending the circulation of writing and documents; throughout his performance in *The Man of Law's Tale* the narrator expresses such understanding. Exploring these anxieties, I argue that this tale repeats the skepticism about written authority and concerns about the circulation of written texts that Chaucer often expresses in works such as *The House of Fame*, *The Legend of Good Women*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and "Chaucer's Wordes unto Adam, his Owne Scriveyn." The chapter poses this question: why, of all the tales in the *Canterbury Tales*, did Chaucer choose to introduce this kind of skepticism in *The Man of Law's Tale*? I seek an answer to the question in the narrator's profession as a sergeant-of-law as well

²⁵ *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, vol. 3, 431. See also Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 222-23; and Giancarlo, "Murder, Lies, and Storytelling," 87.

²⁶ Four copies have been preserved. See Giancarlo, "Murder, Lies, and Storytelling," 82-83.

as Chaucer's relationship to Rickhill and other members of contemporary legal circles. That lawyers were involved in both Gloucester's confession and *The Man of Law's Tale* is not a mere coincidence. If Gloucester's confession is a tale narrated by Richard II's justice Rickhill, *The Man of Law's Tale* is a story narrated by a lawyer equally well practiced in handling documents. Documentary manipulations, fears of interception, suspicions of forgery, and treason are all implicated in both narratives recited by these men of law. Chaucer's close connections with contemporary legal circles as well as his personal experience in the government would have made him keenly aware that important political events during the reign of Richard II seriously questioned the authority of written documents. By examining the letters, I show that the Man of Law finds in Custance the image of an ideal text that does not get contaminated by circulation.

The chapter also compares *The Man of Law's Tale* to the tale in which Chaucer expresses his doubt on the reliability of all human language: *The Manciple's Tale*. Although scholars have noticed several links between these two tales, their relation has never been a serious subject of discussion. The similarities and connections between the two tales are, however, strong enough to suggest their thematic connection. In this chapter I argue that while *The Man of Law's Tale* expresses Chaucer's doubt on the reliability of written texts, *The Manciple's Tale* points to the intrinsic instability of human speech.

The Man of Law, "War and Wys"

Clanchy writes that late medieval forgers were not “occasional deviants on the peripheries of legal practice” but “experts entrenched at the center of literary and intellectual culture.”²⁷ Clanchy’s analysis of medieval forgery explains how appropriately Chaucer assigns the episode of Donegild’s forgery to the mouth of the Man of Law, one of the most literate narrators in the *Canterbury Tales*. In her recent study of Chaucerian women’s letters, Sarah Stanbury describes Donegild as Chaucer’s most “enigmatic letter-writing woman.”²⁸ Whereas in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Merchant’s Tale*, Chaucer takes a voyeuristic look at the closed spaces within which women read and write their love letters, in *The Man of Law’s Tale* Chaucer never lets us see the space from which Donegild writes, nor does he explain her motive. The letter emanating from this invisible space, which Stanbury identifies as the mother’s incestuous desire for her son, becomes the source of horror.²⁹

Stanbury correctly points to anxieties and tensions circulating around letter writing and female autonomy in private space. But her discussion fails to recognize the difference between Donegild’s letters and those of other Chaucerian women writers. Whereas May and Criseyde write love letters expressing each writer’s own desire and private thoughts, the letters that Donegild forges are documents containing important information on public affairs. The letter from the constable to the king transmits news

²⁷ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 249.

²⁸ Sarah Stanbury, “Women’s Letters and Private Space in Chaucer,” *Exemplaria* 6 (1994): 283.

²⁹ Stanbury, “Women’s Letters,” 284-285. For another study of Chaucerian women writers, see Jennifer Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History, 1380-1589* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 23-59. Summit argues that women writers in Chaucer’s poems represent the status of Chaucer himself as a vernacular writer disrupting the authority of the classical canon. Summit’s discussion of Chaucerian women writers, however, does not include Donegild.

about the birth of a prince, while the king's letter to the constable conveys a royal command to protect Custance and her son until he returns to the kingdom.

The story of Donegild's forgery also illuminates the letters' evidentiary value. When Alla returns from war and asks for Custance and his child, the constable tells him that they were expelled as the king had ordered, submitting the royal letter as evidence:

The Constable gan aboute his herte colde,
And pleynly al the manere he hym tolde
As ye han herd – I kan tell it no better—
And sheweth the kyng his seel and eek his letter,
And seyde, “Lord as ye commande me
Up peyne of death, so have I doon, certain.” (879-884)

The constable's mention of the “seel” (882) illustrates the narrator's legal knowledge that the seal of the king guarantees the authority of his words. The constable also claims his own innocence by emphasizing that he just followed what his lord commanded through the letter, in other words, an official document: “Lord as ye commande me / Up peyne of death, so have I doon, certain” (883-884). When the counterfeit letter is presented, Alla discovers the offender by identifying the hand that wrote it. The king kills his own mother without giving her a chance to confess or defend herself since the letter itself serves as clear material evidence of her crime.

A comparison with Gower's “Tale of Constance” demonstrates the significance of documents in *The Man of Law's Tale*. The importance of documentary evidence in *The Man of Law's Tale* contrasts to Gower's emphasis on oral confession. Forged letters also appear in Gower's version of the story, but his tale does not underscore the evidentiary value of the letters. No mention of the “seal” appears when the chamberlain gives the counterfeit letter to the king: “The letter schewed, rad it is, / Which thei forsaken

eueridel” (1252-3). The procedure of discovering the hand is also missing in Gower’s “Tale of Constance.” Instead, the king reads the letter and immediately suspects treason:

Tho was it vnderstonde wel
That ther is tresoun in the thing:
The messenger tofore the king
Was broght and sodeinliche opposed;
And he, which nothing hath supposed
Bot alle wel, began to seie
That he nagher vpon the weie
Abode, bot only in a stede;
And cause why that he so dede
Was, as he wente to and fro,
At Knaresburgh be nygtes tuo
The kinges moder made him duelle.
And whan the king it herde tell,
Withinne his herte he wiste als faste
The treson which his moder caste. (1254-68)

Here Domilde’s crime is confirmed mainly through the messenger’s confession. Upon hearing this confession, the king rides off to Knaresburgh to find his mother. In *Confessio Amantis*, Domilde receives a chance to confess her crime before being burned to death.

The king

... let a fyr do make tho,
And bad men forto caste hire inne;
Bot ferst sche told out al the sinne,
And dede hem alle forto wite
Hwo sche the letters hadde write,
Fro point to point as it was wrought. (1286-1291)

In Gower’s version, the oral confessions of the messenger and Domilde are sufficient to reveal the truth of Domilde’s treasonous acts.

Chaucer’s emphasis on the documentary value of the letters in *The Man of Law’s Tales* seems deliberate, especially when we consider that the narrator of this tale is a

lawyer whose social position is associated with documentary evidence and written culture. In the *General Prologue*, Chaucer portrays the Man of Law as a master of documentary manipulation:

In termes hadde he caas and doomes alle
That from the tyme of kyng William were falle.
Therto he koude endite and make a thyng,
Ther koude no wight pynche at his writyng;
And every statut koude he pleyn by rote. (*The General Prologue*, 323-27)

Chaucer's portrait repeats the satiric attack on the avarice and corruption of lawyers in contemporary estates satires, which present a remarkably unified view of the legal profession. According to this portrait, lawyers are arrogant and amass wealth from illegal dealing in buying lands and houses. They despise the poor and "establish new laws which oppress their neighbors."³⁰ Chaucer calls the Man of Law a "greet purchasour" (318) and mentions that "fees and robes hadde he many oon"(317). But as Jill Mann observes, the details that Chaucer borrowed from other estates satires omit traditional censures against the vices of lawyers; for instance, the narrator of the *General Prologue* refers to the Man of Law's "purchasing" as evidence of his professional skill, not of corruption and does not specify whether the pilgrim lawyer is acting for his client or for himself.³¹

Furthermore, the narrator offers the lawyer's "fees and robes" as evidence of his excellent professional knowledge since the Man of Law received them for his "science and heigh renoun" (316). The praise for the Man of Law's flawless writing of writs and amazing memory all reveal the narrator's admiration for this pilgrim. Calling the Man of Law a

³⁰ Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 87.

³¹ Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, 88-89.

“master of impeccable discourse,” David Wallace observes that he “makes and breaks fortunes and decides on matters of life and death through his control of the written and spoken word.”³² Although Wallace does not differentiate the Man of Law’s writing skill from his verbal dexterity, the use of such words as “endite,” “writing,” and “statut” in the passage from the *General Prologue* quoted above shows that Chaucer pays particular attention to the Man of Law’s pre-eminence as an authority on writing and documents.

Lawyers in general did not rank highly in medieval society, but many critics agree that Chaucer’s Man of Law is a “figure of considerable cultural status.”³³ John Manly claims that the Man of Law is socially the highest ranked figure among the pilgrims, higher than the Knight or even the Prioress; he identifies Thomas Pinchbeck as the real-life model for Chaucer’s Man of Law.³⁴ Based on the abbreviated names of sergeants and justices in the Year Books, W. F. Bolton also finds connections between Pinchbeck and the Man of Law.³⁵ Bolton maintains that the line “Ther koude no wight pynche at his writyng” alludes to the sergeant Pinchbeck, who is constantly referred to as “Pynch” in the Year Book. Between 1387 and 1388, the years that Chaucer probably began working on the *Canterbury Tales*, the poet had a hostile relationship with Pinchbeck, that is reflected, Bolton asserts, in Chaucer’s sardonic remarks on his wisdom and writing skill

³² David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 184.

³³ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 201. Sergeants were the most prestigious and powerful lawyers in the age of Chaucer. They ranked above esquires and were the equals of knights. See the explanatory notes in the *Riverside Chaucer*, 811.

³⁴ John Matthew Manly, *Some New Light on Chaucer* (New York: Henry Holt, 1926), 131-57.

³⁵ W. F. Bolton, “Pinchbeck and the Chaucer Circle in the Law Reports and Records of 11-13 Richard II,” *Modern Philology* 84 (1987): 401-407. The Year Books are law reports of the proceedings before the King’s Bench and the Court of Commons. While the Plea Roll records the trial itself and its outcome, the Year Books are mostly concerned with the pretrial pleading; see Bolton, “Pinchbeck and the Chaucer Circle,” 401.

in the *General Prologue*.³⁶ Furthermore, Bolton claims that Pinchbeck had a career sufficiently like the one outlined in the *General Prologue*: Pinchbeck came from an apparently landless family but was known for the land he accumulated. We still do not know, however, whom Chaucer had in mind as he worked on *The Man of Law's Tale* and the portrait of the sergeant in the *General Prologue*.

I propose that Chaucer's portrait of the Man of Law, instead of a specific individual, represents a picture of medieval lawyers in general and the "textual community" that they formed in late medieval England.³⁷ The legal profession was a growth industry of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.³⁸ Until the mid-thirteenth century most courts had been staffed largely by ecclesiastics; but the gradual expansion of state law and the increasing complexity of writs encouraged the growth of a professional lawyer class, mostly comprised of laity. The growing popularity of the legal profession as a career in late medieval society demanded the establishment of institutions

³⁶ According to Bolton, Pinchbeck signed a writ of *Capias sicut alias* against Chaucer in 1388 and repeatedly opposed members of the Chaucer circle: three members of Chaucer's legal circle, William Rickhill, Robert Charlton, and John Wadham, were opponents in eleven of the seventeen cases Pinchbeck pleaded during 11 Richard II. Chaucer and Pinchbeck were also on the opposite sides of the dispute between Gloucester and John of Gaunt. See Bolton, "Pinchbeck and the Chaucer Circle," 403–404.

³⁷ For the notion of "textual community," see Brian Stock, *Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 522. Stock defines "textual community" as a group of people whose social activities are centered around texts. The text in question does not have to be something written down nor the people literate.

³⁸ For the legal profession as an efficient means of social advancement in late medieval England, see Brigitte Vale, "The Profits of the Law and the 'Rise' of the Scopes: Henry Scrope (d. 1336) and Geoffrey Scrope (d. 1340) Chief Justices to Edward II and Edward III," *Profit, Piety, and the Professions in Later Medieval England*, ed. Michael A. Hicks (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1990), 91–102. See also Maurice Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages, 1348–1500* (London and New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1990), 15–6; and M. M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society: An Economic History of Britain in the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972), 175. J. R. Maddicott observes that the reign of Edward I saw a weakening of the boundaries that had separated the justices from lay society. No longer were the justices clerks since laymen had begun to fill this position by their skill as pleaders; see *Law and Lordship: Royal Justices as Retainers in Thirteenth and Fourteenth-Century England*, Past and Present Supplement 4 (Oxford: the Past and Present Society, 1978), 24.

that could provide aspiring students with the legal training required for various positions in the government. Even when students did not intend to follow a career in the law, institutions of legal education still made an appropriate alternative to the universities for men who wanted education in the liberal arts and law. Institutions of legal education promoted lay literacy based on English; they also contributed to the emergence of “cultivated readers” who began to use literacy beyond their professional activities.³⁹ As Malcolm B. Parkes has noted, late medieval lawyers acquired the “habit of having at their elbow a text to which they could refer for information” and expanded their reading skill for literate recreation.⁴⁰

Chaucer may have been among those men of his class who had part of their education at one of the Inns of Court in which lawyers were trained.⁴¹ Although

³⁹ For the relationship between the spread of vernacular literacy and the establishment of legal education, see Keen, *English Society*, 235-7; and Ives, “The Common Lawyers,” *Profession, Vocation, and Culture in Late Medieval England: Essays Dedicated to the Memory of A. R Myers*, ed. Cecil H. Clough (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), 181-217. For the notion of “cultivated readers,” see M. B. Parkes, “The Literacy of the Laity,” in *The Medieval World*, ed. David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby (London: Aldus Books, 1973), 555. According to Parkes, the manuscripts compiled by a Berkshire lawyer in 1260 contain material that indicates the compiler’s interest in vernacular literature. The manuscripts include the Anglo-Norman story *Horn*, Robert Grossteste’s *Le chateau d’amour*, *The Fables* of Marie de France, and Guillaume le Clerc’s *Bestiary*, alongside the statutes, precedents, and treatises on the law; see p. 562. Studies of late medieval lawyers’ ownership of books also show the growing involvement of the legal profession with contemporary literary culture. Medieval lawyers were eager advocates of humanist learning, as well as patrons of art and literature; see G. A. Lester, “The Books of a Fifteenth-Century English Gentleman: Sir John Paston,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 88 (1987): 200-217; C. E Moreton, “The ‘Library’ of a Late Fifteenth-Century Lawyer,” *The Library* 6 (1991): 338-46; and Ives, “The Common Lawyers,” 182.

⁴⁰ Parkes, “The Literacy of the Laity,” 561.

⁴¹ Joseph Allen Hornsby objects to the suggestion that the Inns of Court in Chaucer’s time provided any legal education; he argues that until the early fifteenth century the Inns were merely residences for practicing lawyers during the court term and that only gradually did they evolve into places where young men went to live and learn law; see Hornsby, *Chaucer and the Law* (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1988), 7-20. Whether or not the lawyers of the fourteenth century received the same kind of education offered in the Inns of Court during the fifteenth century, evidence suggests that a developed taste for vernacular literature existed among lawyers even from the thirteenth century; see my footnote n. 39. For details on Chaucer’s legal education and its connection to the Inns of Court, see E. Rickert “Was Chaucer a Student at the Inner Temple?” *The Manly Anniversary Studies in Language and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923), 20-31. The Inns of Court also functioned as important centers for

Chaucer's education in the Inns of Court has not been conclusively established, many biographical facts, such as his relationship with contemporary legal circles and his career as a legal official, indicate his familiarity with legal procedures and the written culture of medieval lawyers.⁴² In their study of the close link between Langlandian reading circles and contemporary civil servants, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice have shown that English bureaucratic service in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was a first home of the vernacular literary culture of Langland's and Chaucer's generation.⁴³ These bureaucrats, most of whom had backgrounds in legal education, were one of the central audiences for English writing in late medieval England. Chaucer, Gower, William Langland, Thomas Usk, and Thomas Hoccleve, authors writing between 1380 and 1427, all had connections with legal circles. Thomas Usk was a legal scribe, and Langland was a scrivener who had a good knowledge of various legal and governmental procedures. Having been educated at one of the Inns of Chancery, Hoccleve also served as a legal scribe and was deeply involved with the literary circle of the period; he worked with the most important scribes and illuminators of Chaucer and was probably involved with the

dramatic performances during the fifteenth century. Although no record exists that testifies to performances of drama in the Inns during the fourteenth century, the records of Furnivall's Inn includes an entry that indicates a dramatic performance in 1407, the year when the records begin. The entry suggests the possibility of earlier dramatic performances in Furnivall's Inn during the fourteenth century; see D. S. Bland, "Interludes in Fifteenth-Century Revels at Furnivall's Inn," *Review of English Studies*, n.s. III (1952): 263.

⁴² The manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* are highly suggestive of a close connection between Chaucer and Chancery. M. B. Parkes and Ian Doyle identify the hands that wrote both the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts as those of Chancery scribes. See Doyle and Parkes, "Production of Copies of the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio Amantis* in the Early Fifteenth Century," in *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts and Libraries: Essays Presented to N. R. Ker*, ed. M. B. Parkes and Andrew G. Watson (London: Scolar Press, 1978), 163-210.

⁴³ Kerby-Fulton and Justice, "Langlandian Reading Circles and the Civil Service in London and Dublin, 1380-1427," *New Medieval Literatures* I, ed. Rita Copeland, David Lawton, and Wendy Scase (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 59-66.

production of the Ellesmere Chaucer.⁴⁴ Gower was a lawyer, and his involvement with the legal world is revealed in his own works: in *Mirour de l'omne* Gower refers to his “striped sleeves,” probably a symbol of civil or legal office; Gower’s comments on the workings of the law in his writings also suggest professional knowledge.⁴⁵ Chaucer held his position in the government as a civil servant whose professional career entailed the reading and writing of official documents.⁴⁶ The late medieval lawyers, justices, and legal scribes who “gained their livelihood by writing and argument” were the group of lay people most profoundly affected by the dissemination of literate habits of mind.⁴⁷ These “men of law” formed a textual community in which they shared their thoughts and fostered English literary culture. *The Man of Law’s Tale* mirrors such a cultural background, which Chaucer had likely experienced from his association with contemporary legal circles.

The Textuality of The Man of Law’s Tale

Chaucer’s intention to introduce the textual and written culture of the Man of Law is apparent from the beginning of Fragment II, which opens with a calculation of time by

⁴⁴ Kerby-Fulton and Justice, “Langlandian Reading Circles,” 60.

⁴⁵ Winthrop Wetherbee, “John Gower,” *The Cambridge History of Medieval Literature*, 589-90.

⁴⁶ Chaucer served as a member of diplomatic missions, a controller of customs, a justice of the peace, a member of Parliament, and the clerk of the king’s works in charge of building and repair at royal residences. His service as a diplomat and a justice of the peace must have involved numerous documents. Interestingly, messenger service was Chaucer’s first commission; a record dating from the peace negotiations at Calais in October 1360 shows that Prince Lionel, one of King Edward’s sons, paid Chaucer for carrying letters from Calais to England; see *The Riverside Chaucer*, xv and xvii.

⁴⁷ Kerby-Fulton and Justice, “Langlandian Reading Circles,” 65.

the Host. Announcing that the “fourth part” of the day is already gone, the Host urges the pilgrims to resume the tale-telling game without wasting any more time:

Oure Hooste saugh wel that the bryghte sonne
The ark of his artificial day hath ronne
The ferthe part, and half an houre and moore,
And though he were nat depe ystert in loore,
He wiste it was the eightetethe day
Of Aprill, that is messenger to May;
And saugh wel that the shadwe of every tree
Was as in lengthe the same quantitee
That was the body erect that caused it.
And therefore by the shadwe he took his wit
That Phebus, which that shoon so clere and bryghte,
Degrees was fyve and fourty clombe on highte,
And for that day, as in that latitude,
It was ten of the klokke, he gan conclude,
And sodeynly he plighte his hors aboute. (1-15)

From the length of the shadow, the Host realizes that it is ten o'clock in the morning.

According to Ong, the practice of calculating time emerged primarily with the advent of written culture; before writing was deeply interiorized, people did not feel themselves situated every moment of their lives in abstract computed time of any sort.⁴⁸ Just as writing reconstitutes in visual space an originally spoken word, the calendar visualizes abstract time.⁴⁹ Not only this reference to the calculation of time, but also the whole

⁴⁸ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 98. According to Aron Ja. Gurevich, mechanical clocks were invented in the late thirteenth century in response to a mercantile need for a precise and uniform way to measure smaller time-intervals. Hence, “theological time” was replaced by “technological time.” Clocks were installed in the towers of the city hall and cathedrals in London between 1326 and 1335; see “The Merchant,” *Medieval Callings*, ed. Jacques Le Goff, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 278.

⁴⁹ For the idea of writing as a reconstitution of speech in visual space, see Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 123. Augustine sees writing as “speech written down” and establishes a hierarchy among speaking, gesturing, listening, writing and reading. In Augustine’s formula the oral word enjoys a privileged status denied to writing; thus writing must have the authentication of speaking. Augustine’s reflection on language involves a binary structure in which writing is a “diminished likeness,” even an “unlikeness” reminiscent of the fallen domain over which the *vox dei* presides. For Augustine, the written word is an empty thing, “lost from its origin and wandering near death.” Hence, Paul’s injunction that “the letter killeth and spirit

opening passage, show that this unlearned Host (“nat depe ystert in lore” [4]) interprets natural phenomena in intellectual terms. As Patricia J. Eberle notes, even though he does not have astronomical instruments and tables, the Host tells the time by looking at the location of “Phoebus” (11) and the size of the shadow of a tree.⁵⁰ He sees that the sun has climbed “forty-five degrees” (12) in the “fourth” (3) part of the sky and measures the “length” (8) and “quantity” (8) of the shadow. The Host depicts April as the “messenger of May” (6), thereby interpreting the change of month in terms of language. The sense of artificiality at the beginning of the Fragment II contrasts to the natural world in which the *General Prologue* begins.

Except in one instance, *The Man of Law’s Tale* consistently follows Fragment I in manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*.⁵¹ Lee Patterson compares *The Man of Law’s Tale* to *The Knight’s Tale* and finds in the tale a new beginning with which the narrator attempts to reconstruct the hierarchical order that has been threatened by the Miller and then totally collapsed by the Cook.⁵² I also detect something initiatory about *The Man of Law’s Tale* that can be compared to *The Knight’s Tale*. Despite the strong connection

quickens” (2 Corinthian 3.6); see Gellrich, *Discourse and Dominion*, 7-13; and *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 95-96. Chaucer’s doubt about the efficacy of writing, which I discuss later in this chapter, seems to have been indebted to Augustine’s idea of writing as “an empty thing lost from its origin.”

⁵⁰ See explanatory notes in the *Riverside Chaucer*, 854

⁵¹ Helen Cooper, *The Oxford Guide to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 126. See also Schibanoff, “Orientalism in *The Man of Law’s Tale*,” 59. The one exception is Hengwrt, where the tale appears at a later point; Hengwrt has misplaced quires (Fragment D, the latter part of the Fragment B², and Fragment H) between *The Cook’s Tale* and *The Man of Law’s Tale*. For a discussion of the order of the tales in Hengwrt, see Ralph Hanna III, “The Hengwrt Manuscript and the Canon of *The Canterbury Tales*,” *English Manuscript Studies 1100-1700* 1 (1989): 64-84.

⁵² Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 280-281. For the initiatory nature of *The Man of Law’s Tale*, see also Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1985), 286; and Schibanoff, “Orientalism in *The Man of Law’s Tale*,” 59-61.

between law and literacy in late medieval England, studies of *The Man of Law's Tale* have scarcely noted the narrator's textual mentality and literacy, prominent from the beginning of his performance. The Knight's class identity is defined by ideas of love, honor, chivalry, and knighthood; his story of Theseus, Arcita, and Palamoun reveals the Knight's nostalgia for a past in which such ideals could flourish. Whereas the Knight's world had become obsolete compared to the realities of fourteenth-century England, the Man of Law introduces a new world with a different system of values in which textuality, literacy, and legal knowledge hold hegemony over the Knight's world of chivalric ideals. As Gellrich mentions, literacy is a "technology of the mind," a special set of "skills" fostered by learning to write and read. Individuals skilled in writing are members of a unique class, an educated elite, which sharply divides itself from social groups with little or no training in the written word.⁵³ Throughout his performance in the Introduction and the tale proper, the Man of Law professes that he belongs to this new world of professional learning.⁵⁴

⁵³ Gellrich, *Discourse and Dominion*, 5.

⁵⁴ The beginning of the tale proper, different from its sources and analogues, is also designed to present a vision of this new world. While Gower's and Trivet's tales of Constance begin with an introduction of virtuous Constance, *The Man of Law's Tale* opens up with a group of Syrian merchants who traffic in news as well as commodities. According to Jürgen Habermas, the establishment of a postal system among merchant guilds began from the fourteenth century, when the expansion of trade required more frequent and exact information about distant events; see *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 16. Wallace also notes that "novelle," the equivalent of the Middle English "tidynges," were essential for the functioning of the medieval Florentine merchant economy; see Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 201-202. On the role of merchants and trade networks in the transmission of news during the Middle Ages, see Eleanor A Congdon, "Datini and Venice: News from the Mediterranean Trade Network," *Across the Mediterranean Frontiers: Trade, Politics, and Religion 1050-1450* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1997), 157-171. The information exchanged among merchants became important for secular power as well. The beginning of *The Man of Law's Tale* marks the emergence of merchants as a political power and the corresponding change in the social order.

The Man of Law's textual mentality is displayed from the beginning of his speech. When asked by the host to "acquit[...] ... [his] biheeste (37)" by telling a tale, the Man of Law assents to the request, replying that he has no intention of breaking the promise since his "text" says so:

To breke forward is nat myn entente.
Biheste is dette, and I wole holde fayn
Al my biheste, I kan no better sayn.
For swich lawe as a man yeveth another wight,
He sholde hymselfen usen it, by right;
Thus woleoure text"(40-45).

But instead of telling his tale right away, the Man of Law offers his commentary on Chaucer's works:

But nathelees, certeyn,
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. (I. 45-52)

The Man of Law's performance in the "Introduction" to his tale establishes him as an authorial figure as well as a critic of Chaucer's works. David Wallace observes such images of the narrator and asks why Chaucer chooses the Man of Law to frame self-identification as a practical producer of tidings and tales. Wallace finds a connection between Chaucer and the Man of Law as producers of fictions, asserting that a medieval lawyer was often referred to as a "narrator" who argues a case as an advocate in the

court.⁵⁵ Whereas Wallace focuses on the image of the Man of Law as an author, my reading pays attention to his role as a reader of Chaucer's works. The Man of Law's comments on *The Seintes Legende of Cupide* reveal particularly how his mentality is deeply invested in textual culture. The Man of Law's speech in the *Introduction* suggests that he must have known Chaucer's works not from listening but from reading his texts. The Man of Law says that "if he [Chaucer] have nought seyde hem ["thrifty" tales]" in one book, he "seyde" them "in another" (51-52). Chaucer's "large volume" (60) contains the "large wounds wyde" (62) of virtuous women, whose fidelity the poet "comendeth with the beste!" (76). In his commentary on Chaucer's work, the Man of Law again uses the word "writeth," ("But certainly no word ne writeth he / Of thilke wikke ensample of Canacee, / That loved hir owene brother sinfully," [77-79]) and observes that the story of Apollonius of Tyre is a "horrible" tale "for to rede" (84). Chaucer, the Man of Law concludes, would never "write" such "unkynde abhomynacions" in his works. By emphasizing the Man of Law's familiarity with written texts, Chaucer introduces the themes of written culture and documentary manipulations that appear prominently in *The Man of Law's Tale*.

Critics have often noted that the Man of Law's account of Chaucer's work in the "Introduction" to his tale is designed to undercut the Man of Law's claim to an exceptional memory, since the tales of good women that the Man of Law lists in his commentary do not match with the tales included in the *Legend of Good Women* as we

⁵⁵ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 201-202. The formal complaint of a plaintiff was known as a *narratio* by the twelfth century. Professional advocates began to speak *narratio* on behalf of the plaintiff by 1200. By the fourteenth century, a written *narratio* began to substitute for the practice of reading the *narratio* in the court. Interestingly, this transition in legal procedure coincides with changes in literary activity in which vernacular poets began to transform themselves from minstrels into authors.

have it.⁵⁶ The Man of Law's catalogue of Cupid's saints omits two of the figures in *The Legend of Good Women*, Cleopatra and Philomela, while including others whose stories are not in Chaucer's work.⁵⁷ The disparity between *The Legend of Good Women* and the Man of Law's account of it seems intentional since it introduces Chaucer's skepticism about the stability of a written text: it is susceptible to manipulation and misunderstanding, and the author has no control over the ways in which his texts are represented to the reader.

The Man of Law's notorious claim in the "Introduction" that he will "speke in prose"(96) also should be considered in the context of the narrator's textuality. Although before telling the tale the Man of Law promises to "speke in prose" (96), both the prologue and the tale of Constance are written in rime royal stanzas:

But of my tale how shal I doon this day?
Me were looth be likned, douteless,
To Muses that men clepe Pierides –
Methamorphosios woot what I mene;
But nathelees, I recche noght a bene
Though I come after hym with hawebake.
I speke in prose, and lat him rymes make. (90-96)

In her explanatory notes to *The Man of Law's Tale*, Eberle states that although the "Introduction," "Prologue," and the tale proper appear together consistently in the

⁵⁶ For instance, Shoaf claims that the Man of Law's catalogue of Cupid's saints is designed to satirize the "punctilious lawyer who, on the verge of telling a tale of the ultimate proper, commits an error on a subject which all the same he gives every appearance of being well informed about"; see "Circulation, Property, and Incest," 289. Another explanation of this disparity is that the "Introduction" to *The Man of Law's Tale* was written while *The Legend of Good Women* was still in progress. For the discussions of this problem, see the explanatory notes in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 854.

⁵⁷ The stories of Dianire, Hermyon, Erro, Eleyne, Ladomya, Penelopee, and Brixseyde listed in the Man of Law's catalogue do not appear in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*.

manuscripts, their relationship to each other has seemed problematic to critics.⁵⁸ Most critics have tended to the view that the reference to “prose” (96) indicates a prose tale was originally to follow, possibly *The Tale of Melibee*. Ralph Elliott explains the appropriateness of the present tale, however, by focusing on the medieval grammar of the sentence, claiming that “I speke in prose,” means “I normally speak in prose.”⁵⁹ Tauno Mustanoja also points out that in Middle English the present tense often refers to habitual action, while the future began to be indicated by auxiliaries such as “wol.”⁶⁰ I agree with Elliott and Mustanoja who argue that “I speke in prose” is exactly what Chaucer means. But rather than focusing on grammar, I seek to explore what Chaucer means by adding the latter part of line 96: “and lat him rymes make.” The gap between “prose” and “rymes” connotes the Man of Law’s perception that his narrative to the pilgrims will eventually be presented in a written form by the poet Geoffrey. The Man of Law is only an amateur storyteller, one of the “Pierides” (92) metamorphosed into magpies for challenging the muses to a singing contest.⁶¹ The tale he can present to the pilgrims is only a “hawebake”(95), a poor dish, since Chaucer has already told “of loveris up and

⁵⁸ For discussions of the Man of Law’s claim, “I speke in prose,” see A. S. G. Edwards, “‘I speke in prose’: *Man of Law’s Tale*, 96,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 92 (1991): 469-70. Edwards argues that “prose” might mean verse under certain conditions. See also E. Talbot Donaldson, “The Order of the *Canterbury Tales*,” in *Essays in Honor of Francis Lee Utley*, ed. Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 199. See also explanatory notes in the *Riverside Chaucer*, 854. Observing that reading *The Man of Law’s Tale* can be a “trial much like Constance’s,” Dinshaw criticizes the text as “bewildering, disorienting, and seemingly endless.” She points to the Man of Law’s promise of a prose narrative as an epitome of the “numerous contradictions, gaps, [and] visible seams” of his performance.

⁵⁹ Ralph W. V. Elliott, *Chaucer’s English* (London: André Deutsch Ltd., 1974), 96.

⁶⁰ Tauno F. Mustanoja, *A Middle English Syntax* (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1960), 483. For the arguments of Elliott and Mustanoja, see also Eberle’s explanatory notes in the *Riverside Chaucer*, 854.

⁶¹ For the story of Pierides, see explanatory notes in the *Riverside Chaucer*, 856. Originally Pierides refers to the nine Muses, whose birthplace is Pieria. But here the Muses are confused with the daughters of King Pierus; see Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* (5.293-678). The Man of Law compares himself to the daughters of Pierus (i.e. a magpie) and Chaucer to the Muses.

doun / Mo than Ovide made of mencion / In his Episteles” (53-55). When he speaks in prose, however, his unskilled tale will be written down and transmitted by Geoffrey – and Chaucer– in well-crafted rime royal stanzas. The Man of Law’s “lat him rymes make” points to the distance between the voice of telling and the text of record; the Man of Law understands that his tale will be ultimately preserved and circulated as a text.

In fact, the textuality of Chaucer’s work is invoked frequently throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. John H. Fisher points out that the *General Prologue* and the links between the tales contain a sort of authorial commentary that helps to establish unity between the solitary writer and the solitary reader.⁶² Although the listening audience of each tale in the *Canterbury Tales* is apparently the pilgrims, the book as a whole addresses both listeners and readers. Clearer evidence that Chaucer was composing for a reading audience is found in the Prologue to *The Miller’s Tale*:

And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and samle,
Of storial thing that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee and hoolyness. (I. 3176-3180)

After warning the readers about the Miller’s churlish tale that he is about to rehearse, Geoffrey recommends that they choose a better tale by turning pages.⁶³ According to Donald Howard, the idea that we can select the tale “by turning over the leaf” shows the

⁶² John H. Fisher, “Chaucer and the Written Language,” *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 244.

⁶³ Chaucer’s explicit reference to literary audiences as “readers” contrasts to Usk who specifies his audiences as “hearers,” not readers: “For bookes written neyther dreden ne shamen, ne stryve conne; but only shewen the entente of the wryter, and yeve remembraunce to the herer” (I. ii. 14. 183-90). Usk’s passage quoted in Fulton and Justice, “Langlandian Reading Circles 1380-1427,” 75. Fulton and Justice use this passage in order to claim that Usk’s borrowings from the C-text of *Piers Plowman* in the *Testament* were based on his oral experience of Langland’s work.

“bookness,” more precisely “paperness” of the *Canterbury Tales*.⁶⁴

The Man of Law's Tale is the place where such “bookness” of the *Canterbury Tales* is most conspicuously represented. The tale abounds particularly in authorial images: scenes of Alla and Donegild reading and writing privately in their own rooms call to mind Chaucer's self construction as a solitary author in his dream visions; the Constable and Alla communicate in writing, just as Chaucer attempts a written communication with a reader through his own books.

The division of the tale into chapters is another indication of its location in written culture. The tale of Custance is divided into four parts, with the beginning and the ending of each chapter clearly marked by “Explicit” and “Sequitur.” According to Paul Saenger, changes in the textual format of fourteenth-century manuscripts happened simultaneously with the spread of silent private reading.⁶⁵ Oral reading had usually involved a continuous reading of a text from beginning to end. But from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, subdivisions were introduced, and colored paragraph marks came into common use to isolate units of intellectual content.⁶⁶

In *The Man of Law's Tale*, the narrator's effort to control the tale, thereby presenting the story as the product of a learned author, is visible; he constantly summarizes, comments, and explains at every important moment. For instance, when Custance has to leave Rome to be wedded to the Sowdan of Surrye, the narrator, using the theory of judicial astronomy, explains that the position of the heavenly bodies was

⁶⁴ Donald Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 65-66.

⁶⁵ Paul Saenger, *Space Between Words: The Origin of Silent Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 258-261.

⁶⁶ Saenger, *Space Between Words*, 259.

unfavorable at the time of her departure:

Infortunat ascendent tortuous,
Of which the lord is helplees falle, allas,
Out of his angle into the derkeste hour!
O Mars, o atazir, as in this cas!
O fieble moone, unhappy been thy pass!
Thou knyttest thee ther thou art nat received;
Ther thou were weel, fro thennes artow weyved” (302-8).

Also in Part I, enraged at her son’s marriage and conversion to Christianity, the mother of the Sowdan determines to protect her own religion by destroying the Christians who accompanied Custance. The Sowdanesse summons her council and plans to kill Custance during a wedding banquet. The Man of Law’s comments on her treacherous acts in the next two stanzas clearly show his intention to guide the responses of the reader. He calls the Sowdanesse a “Virago” (359), “Semyrame the secounde” (359), and “serpent under femynnytee” (360). He compares her act to that of “Satan,” who attempted the destruction of human beings through Eve (365-371). The Man of Law’s effort to present his narrative as a literate product is further recognized in the Epilogue to this tale. When the Man of Law finishes speaking, the Host praises the tale and asks the Parson, another “learned” person, to continue the game of tale-telling: “This was a thrifty tale for the nones! / Sir Parisshe Prest,” quod he, “for Goddes bones, / Telle us a tale, as was thi forward yore. / I se wel that ye lerned men in lore / Can moche good, by Goddes dignitee!” (1165-9).

The Man of Law’s textual mentality is best represented in the image of the “Britoun book” in the court scene, where Custance is tried for the murder of Hermengyld. After having escaped the carnage of the Sowdanese, Custance arrives in

Northumberland and stays under the protection of the constable and his wife Hermengyld. When a young knight falls in love with Custance and she refuses to return his “foul affeccion,” his lust turns into hate. One night he kills Hermengyld in her chamber and hides the knife in Custance’s bed. When the knife is discovered, the constable takes Custance to the king, before whom the young knight falsely accuses her for the murder. But as soon as the false knight makes an oath upon “the Britoun book, written with Evaungiles (666),” an invisible hand strikes his neck bone and makes his eyes burst out of his face.

Drawing on late medieval textual metaphors of Christ abundant in contemporary texts and artifacts, the Man of Law’s narrative in the court scene tactfully identifies the “book of Britain” with the image of Christ as the dispenser of justice.⁶⁷ Bewailing the situation of Custance who has no “champioun” (631) to fight for her, the narrator comments that only Christ “that starf for our redempcioun / And boond Sathan” (633-4) could protect the innocent woman. The “Britoun book” on which the false knight swears before he is struck by a mysterious hand plays the role of Christ, the “stronge champion” (635) who saves Custance’s life by showing a “miracle” (636). When the knight’s eyes burst from his face because of the blow, the Man of Law explains the punishment as a work of unfathomable providence:

A voys was herd in general audience,
And seyde, “Thou hast desclaundred, gilteles,
The doghter of hooly chirche in heigh presence;
Thus hastou doon, and yet holde I my pees!”
Of this mervaille agast was al the prees” (673-7).

⁶⁷ For the textual metaphors of Christ, see Steiner, *Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 193-228.

Gower's tale of Custance also features the "book" on which the false knight swears to Custance's guilt. Chaucer's adaptation, however, emphasizes its narrator's textual mentality constituted by his expertise in legal knowledge. Unlike Gower, Chaucer makes the trial a "formal judicial inquest before the king."⁶⁸ In *The Man of Law's Tale* the king orders a book to be brought as part of the trial. But in Gower's version, the book "happeth" (868) to lie before the false knight, who inadvertently swears, "Now be this bok, which hier is write, / Constance is gultief, wel I wot" (872-3). As soon as the knight finishes his speech, a "hond of heuene" strikes him down to prove his falsehood. The "book" in Gower's version functions as a "Gospel book" placed on the altar as a symbol of truth.⁶⁹ Chaucer's "Britoun book" that distinguishes truth from falsehood and administers justice embodies the role of legal texts familiar to the narrator. Even the title of the text, "Britoun book," refers to the fact that the court scene happens in England (Northumberland), not the Mediterranean. The "Britoun book" represents the Man of Law's deep trust in the authority of written texts; it also mirrors changes in late medieval English society, where justice was increasingly centered on the written document.⁷⁰

Treacherous Texts

From the time that Henry II established a centralized bureaucracy, literacy contributed to replacing the old oral processes of king's courts with a new literate and

⁶⁸ See the explanatory notes in *Riverside Chaucer*, 861.

⁶⁹ Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, 264-82.

⁷⁰ For the changed notion of justice during the late Middle Ages, see Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, xiv. Green argues that late medieval England is marked by a shift from the "communally authenticated troth-plight to the judicially enforced written contract, from a truth that resides in people to one located in documents."

authoritarian rule of law.⁷¹ The spread of literacy was slow and unsteady, but the power of writing to transform intellectual, bureaucratic, and legal institutions increased from the twelfth century. With the growth of literacy, however, came “skepticism, analysis, and demystification” of written texts.⁷² Both Gloucester’s confession and *The Man of Law’s Tale* show similar, complicated responses to the growth of documentary culture in late medieval England: they both reveal dependence on and belief in writing and written documents; in both cases documents are manipulated on the basis of that trust in writing; and the danger of manipulation becomes the source of distrust in the efficacy of documents and written forms of communication. The interception and forging of letters in *The Man of Law’s Tale* reveal anxieties surrounding the spread of literacy and the consequent growth of written communication in fourteenth-century England.

In Chaucer’s texts, an exchange of letters often involves adultery, betrayal, and treason. The tensions surrounding women’s reading and writing have been noted in Stanbury’s discussion of Chaucerian women writers.⁷³ The episode of the counterfeit letters in *The Man of Law’s Tale* shows, however, that similar tensions attend men’s letter-writing. The letters of Alla – and Troilus – both carry the danger of interception and accusations of treason. Problems of written communication are particularly conspicuous

⁷¹ Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, 283.

⁷² Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, 283. See also Bruce O’Brien, “Forgery and the Literacy of the Early Common Law,” *Albion* 27 (1995): 11-13. According to O’Brien, after 1066 the increase in the number of forgeries undermined social belief in written evidence as “one of the most trusted vehicles for truth.” O’Brien claims, however, that the extensive forgery that stifled the growth of literacy for a period after the Conquest proved eventually to be the “greatest stimulus to the development of the literacy” in English government and law” during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries; see “Forgery and the Literacy,” 15.

⁷³ Stanbury, “Women’s Letters and Private Space,” 273. See also my discussion of Stanbury in p. 78 in this chapter.

when Chaucerian letter-writers read and write alone.⁷⁴ The way that Alla receives Donegild's forged letter illustrates the dangers attending the silent reading of a written message:

Wo was this kyng whan he this letter had sayn,
But to no wight he tolde his sorwes soore,
But of his owene hand he wroot again,
“Welcome the sonde of Crist for everemoore
To me that am now lerned in his loore!
Lord, welcome be thy lust and thy plesaunce;
My lust I putte al in thyn ordianunce.

“Kepeth this child, al be it foul or feir,
And eek my wyf, unto myn hoom-comynge.
Crist, whan hym list, may sende me an heir
Moore agreeable than this to my likynge.”
This letter he se leth, pryvely wepynge,
Which to the message was take soone,
And forth he gooth; ther is na moore to doone. (757-770)

When a medieval messenger brought a letter, it was a common practice for some parts of the message to be delivered orally. Particularly with important subjects in which absolute secrecy was required, medieval princes often made use of messengers carrying oral messages that were not always corroborated by written documents.⁷⁵ In *The Man of*

⁷⁴ According to Saenger, silent private reading became increasingly pervasive in the fourteenth century when authors composed texts in cursive letters with spaces between words. In antiquity and the early Middle Ages, when texts were composed orally, authors expected them to be read aloud while the audience listened without the aid of a written text. Fourteenth-century scholastic texts were marked by a visual vocabulary, however, indicating that both the author and the reader were expected to have the codex before them. The practice of silent reading was most conspicuous in the medieval classroom. Although public lectures continued to play an important role in medieval universities, visual reading by the listener was essential for comprehending the complexities of the subject matter. While the professor read aloud from his commentary, the students followed the text silently from their own books. See Saenger, *Space Between Words*, 258-61. A distinctively fourteenth-century phenomenon, the inclusion of silent private reading in Chaucer's tale suggests that the author paid attention to problems of contemporary society, in which written communication and silent reading has begun to replace oral report.

⁷⁵ Sophia Menache, *The Vox Dei: Communication in the Middle Ages* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 18.

Law's Tale, however, the messenger's oral report is missing at the moment Alla receives the forged letter. Alla never asks the messenger what news he brings: the king reads the letter alone without telling anyone about it, and writes the reply with his own hands, secretly mourning.

The privacy emphasized in this episode contrasts to the messenger's open announcement of the news at Donegild's castle. As soon as the messenger meets Donegild, he informs her of the birth of a prince in expectation for an "avantage" (729): "Madame' quod he, 'ye may be glad and blithe, / And thanketh God an hundred thousand sithe! / My lady queene hath child, withouten doute, / To joye and blisse to al this regne about" (732-735). The narrator accuses the messenger of "jangling" (774), since his betraying of "all secreeness" (773) triggers Donegild's treacherous action. The absence of the public announcement to Alla, however, makes the king overlook the intentional disinformation contained in the false letter, resulting in his loss of Custance and his own son.

If we compare *The Man of Law's Tale* with Gower's version of Constance story, we see Chaucer's prominent emphasis on the privacy of the moment of letter writing. In *Confessio Amantis*, Gower makes it clear that the exchanged letter is written not by Domilde but somebody else:

Bot in the nygt al priuely
Sche tok the lettres whiche he hadde,
Fro point to point and ouerradde,
As sche that was thurghout vntrewe,
And let do wryten other newe
In stede of hem, and thus thei spieke. (954-959)

Although Domilde also acts “priuely” at night, that she “let do wryten other newe” implies the existence of an accomplice. Privacy raises questions about the agent of transgression, which Chaucer reinforces through grammar – passive voice. Chaucer’s use of the passive voice to describe Donegild’s action strangely obscures the hand that wrote the letter:

The messenger drank sadly ale and wyn,
And stolen were his lettres pryvely
Out of his box, whil he sleep as a swyn;
And counterfeted was ful subtilly
Another letter, wroght ful sinfully,
Unto the kyng direct of his mateere
Fro his constable, as ye shal after here. (243-249)

In *The Man of Law’s Tale*, the stealing and forgery of letters repeatedly occur in the passive voice. The constable’s letter to the king is “stolen pryvely” (244) and “another letter” is “countrefeted ful subtilly” (247). Chaucer also describes the counterfeiting of Alla’s reply to the constable in the passive: “Eft were his letters stolen everychon, / And countrefeted letters in this wyse” (II. 792-3). By using the passive voice to suppress any mention of possible accomplices, Chaucer ascribes Donegild’s treacherous acts to the danger of privacy and secrecy implicated in written communication.

Donegild’s implied ability to read and write adds tension to the episode of her forgery since in the Middle Ages literacy was often associated with heresy and dissension. Scholars who have studied the Lollard movement in late medieval England agree that literacy played an important role in disseminating heretical ideas in society.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ See Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Margaret Aston, “Lollardy and Sediton, 1381-1431,” *Past and Present* (1960): 1-39; Justice, “Inquisition, Speech, and Writing: A Case from Late Medieval Norwich,” in *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages*, ed. Rita Copeland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1996.

Literacy made silent reading possible, which in turn provided an opportunity for expressing subversive political thoughts because “silent reading allows private responses to arise without the sanction of an audience of present listeners.”⁷⁷ A heretical text was often intended for private study, which encouraged “individual critical thinking and contributed ultimately to the development of skepticism and intellectual heresy.”⁷⁸ Richard II’s proclamation in 1388 against the books of the Lollards reveals his fear of the dangers of secrecy and sedition attending the dissemination of heretical ideas through writing: “And further to proclaim, and upon our account firmly to forbid anyone, of whatsoever estate, grade, or condition he be, upon pain of imprisonment and of forfeiture of all that they can forfeit to us, to maintain, teach, or pertinaciously defend, secretly or openly, any such depraved and wicked opinions, or in any wise to presume to keep, or write, or cause to be written, sell, or buy, any such books, tracts, leaflets, or pamphlets.”⁷⁹ According to Henry Knighton, the “lords and commons of the realm” petitioned the king that the Lollards’ wicked beliefs had left the “Church as a vessel riven day by day” and deteriorated the “glorious realm of England.” Responding to the parliamentary petition, the king ordered ecclesiastical authorities to “scrutinize [Lollards’] English books” and exterminate errors, thereby uniting “the people in orthodox faith.”⁸⁰ The contemporary anxiety about literacy as a potential threat to social harmony resonates strongly in the episode of Donegild’s forgery.

⁷⁷ Gellrich, *Discourse and Dominion*, 16. See also Saenger, *Space Between Words*, 264-65 and 273-74.

⁷⁸ Saenger, *Space Between Words*, 264.

⁷⁹ *Knighton’s Chronicle 1337-1396*, ed. and trans. G. H. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 439-441.

⁸⁰ *Knighton’s Chronicle 1337-1396*, 439.

In *The Man of Law's Tale*, Donegild's literacy sows the seed of discord between the king and his subject. The constable laments the wickedness of humanity – in this case, the king – when he receives from the messenger the royal letter commanding the banishment of Custance and her son: “And whan that he this pitous letter say, / Ful ofte he seyde, ‘Allas and weylaway!’ / ‘Lord Crist,’ quod he, ‘how may this world endure, / So ful of synne is many a creature?’” (809-811). When the king returns from the war against the Scots and asks about Custance and his son, the constable's heart again turns “colde” (III. 879) as he explains what has happened to them. People also take pity on Custance, believing that the king has sent “this cursed letter” (821). Chaucer emphasizes the seriousness of Donegild's offence to society by comparing her to Satan, who attempted to alienate humankind from God: “Fy, feendlych spirit, for I dar wel telle, / Thogh thou here walke, thy spirit is in hell!” (783-4).

The unreliability of written “tidings” in the scene of Donegild's forgery contrasts to the truthfulness of oral “tidings” in the opening scene of *The Man of Law's Tale*. When the Syrian merchants arrive in Rome, they hear of Custance's “excellent renoun” (150), the “commune voys of every man” (155) praising Custance for her virtues fit for a queen: this Roman princess is beautiful, generous, and humble without any “grenehede or folye” (163); she is the “mirour of alle curtesye” (166); her heart is the “verray chamber of hoolynes” (167) and her hand the “minstre of fredam for almesse” (168). The narrator abruptly but decidedly confirms the truth of the “commune voys” (155): “And al this voys was sooth, as God is trewe” (169). When the merchants arrive in Surrye, the sultan asks them to give “tidynges of sundry regnes” (181); their account of Constance's “greet nobless” (185) is so detailed that the Sowdan falls in love with her: “... this Sowdan hath

caught so greet plesance / To han hir figure in his remembrance, / That al his lust and al
his bisy cure / Was for to love hire while his lyf may dure” (186-189). This passage
illustrates the power of spoken words that inspire love by conveying a vivid image of
Custance.

According to Wallace, in *The Man of Law’s Tale* the news brought by the Syrian
merchants is easily believed because of their reputation for credibility. Pointing to
merchants as the most reliable sources of news in the Middle Ages, Wallace asserts that
“the honest good faith of the human messenger” contrasts to “the duplicity of the
impersonal written message.”⁸¹ Chaucer’s other poems, however, express suspicion and
anxiety about oral communication mediated by human purveyors. For instance, in *The
House of Fame* the rumor and gossip of the shipmen and pilgrims cause problems since
their oral reports are just as mediated as letters are:

Whan oon had herd a thing, ywis,
He com forth right to another wight,
An gan him tellen anon-ryght
The same that to him was told,
Or hyt a forlong way was old,
But gan somewhat for to eche
To this tydyng in this speche
More than hit ever was. (*The House of Fame*, 2060-67)

In the House of Rumor, orally communicated news undergoes a process of continual
amplification and transformation until truth and falsehood are inseparably “compounded”
(2108).⁸²

⁸¹ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 186.

⁸² For detailed discussion of *The House of Fame*, see my Introduction, 1-4.

Rather, the credibility of the merchants' news relies more on the fact that their tale of Constance is based on their unmediated personal experience. The opening scene of the tale emphasizes that the merchants themselves visit Rome and listen to the "tidings":

Now fil it that the maistres of that sort
Han shapen hem to Rome for to wende;
Were it for chapmanhod or for disport,
Noon oother message wolde they thider sende,
But comen himself to Rome; this is the ende. (141-145).

The merchants even have a chance to see Constance themselves before leaving Rome:

This marchantz han doon fraught hir shippes newe,
And whan they han this blissful mayden sayn,
Hoom to Surrye been they went ful fayn,
And doon hir nedes as they han doon yore,
And lyven in wele; I kan sey yow namoore" (171-5).

The emphasis on direct experience at the beginning of *The Man of Law's Tale* suggests that only unmediated communication guarantees credibility of information. In the episode of Donegild's forgery, the letter's unreliability stems from the mediated nature of written communication. The oral messages of the constable and Alla are written down on paper and delivered by a messenger.

In *The Man of Law's Tale* Chaucer's anxiety about the problems of mediated textual transmission is summed up in the image of the "heavenly book." On the one hand, the metaphoric book emphasizes the authority of a written text and reveals the textual mentality of a narrator who compares the entire universe to a book. On the other hand, the "heavenly" book points to the inefficacy of written human communication that is subject to misrepresentation and misunderstanding. The Man of Law mentions the

“heavenly book” when the Sowdan falls in love and finds a way to marry Custance:

Paraventure in thilke large book
Which that men clepe the hevene ywritten was
With sterres, whan that he his birthe took,
That he for love sholde han his deeth, allas!
For in the sterres, clerer than is glas,
Is writen, God woot, whoso koude it rede,
The deeth of every man, withouten drede.

In sterres, many a winter therbiforn,
Was writen the deeth of Ector, Achilles,
Of Pompei, Julius, er they were born;
The strif of Thebes; and of Ercules,
Of Sampson, Turnus, and of Socrates
The deeth; but mennes wittes ben so dulle
That no wight kan wel rede it atte fulle. (190-203)

Contemplating a human being’s ignorance of his own fate, the Man of Law says that an individual’s fate is all written in a “large book / Which that men clepe the hevene” (190). Chaucer adopts this passage from Bernardus Silvestris, who compares the heavens to a book in which future events are written. Chaucer’s “heavenly book” is also reminiscent of Dante’s *Paradiso* in *The Divine Comedy*, in which the poet talks about the “book in the sky.”⁸³ According to Gellrich, Dante adopts the image of the celestial text as a “metaphor for his own personal experience of the vision of God.”⁸⁴ Through the metaphor of the heavenly book, Bernardus and Dante express reverence for the mystical and ineffable power of God.

In *The Man of Law’s Tale*, Chaucer alters the idea of a stable heavenly book in

⁸³ See Dante’s *Paradiso* 33. 86-88. For a discussion of this passage, see Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book*, 158-9. Considering that Chaucer aspired to the grandeur of Dante, the link between Chaucer’s “book in Heaven” and Dante’s “book in the sky” seems significant. The image also appears in *Apocalypse*, from which Dante adopted the image.

⁸⁴ Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book*, 159.

order to show how different readers interpret a text different ways and why a written text cannot serve as an efficient means of communication. Whereas Bernardus stresses the boldness of Turnus, the strength of Hercules, and the fighting of Achilles, Chaucer stresses their deaths. By turning the metaphoric book into something ominous that contains only evil fates such as “strif” and “deeth” (200, 202), Chaucer demonstrates the Man of Law’s use of a text to support his story about the Sowdan’s ill-omened marriage.⁸⁵ Chaucer’s conclusion to this extended metaphor also shows a marked change from the source. Bernardus observes that God created the heaven in order that “ages to come might be beheld in advance, signified by starry ciphers.”⁸⁶ But Chaucer writes that the limitation of human understanding makes it impossible to read the celestial record, that is “clerer than glas” (194): “mennes wittes ben so dulle/ That no wight kan wel rede it ate fulle” (202-3). The impenetrable book tells us that written communication is never free from problems of textual disruption and misunderstanding.

The Literary Implications of Documentary Culture

The dangers of manipulation and miscommunication implicated in documentary culture have particular significance for Chaucer, whose works often reveal anxiety about problems accompanying the transmission of the poet’s own literary texts. For instance, in

⁸⁵ On Chaucer’s use of Bernardus’s *Megacosmos*, see the explanatory notes in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 858-9.

⁸⁶ For the citation from *Megacosmos*, see *The Cosmographia of Bernadus Silvestris*, trans and intro. Winthrop Wetherbee (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 76. See also the explanatory notes in the *Riverside Chaucer*, 858.

“Chaucers Wordes Unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn,” the poet asks the scribe not to miscopy his manuscripts:⁸⁷

Adam scriveyn, if ever it thee bifalle
Boece or Troylus for to wryten newe,
Under thy long lokkes thou most have the scalle,
But after my making thow wryte more trewe;
So ofte adaye I mot thy werk renewe,
It to correcte and eke to rubbe and scrape,
And al is thorough thy negligence and rape.⁸⁸

This poem ascribes the problem of textual transmission to the “simple matter of transcription” by the “negligent” (7) and hasty scribe. Other poems, however, communicate Chaucer’s anxiety about “more fundamental matters of understanding” by unknown readers of his manuscripts.⁸⁹ For instance, the invocation in Book V of *Troilus and Criseyde* shows that Chaucer is uncertain how his texts would be received by readers: “And for ther is so gret diversite / In English and in writing of oure tonge, / So prey I God that non myswrite the, / Ne themysmetre for defaute of tonge; / And red wherso thow be, or elles songe, / That thow be understonde, God I biseche” (1793-99).

⁸⁷ For the identification of “Adam scriveyn,” see Linne R. Mooney, “Chaucer’s Scribe,” *Speculum* 81 (2006): 97-138. Mooney identifies the scribe as Adam Pinkhurst, who had an affiliation with the Mercer’s Company and worked as a writer of court letters in London. Mooney also ascribes to Adam Pinkhurst the hand that copied the Mercers’ petition of 1388 against the former mayor of London, Sir Nicholas Brember. Whether it was Adam Pinkhurst or not, scholars agree that the scribe whose hand appears in both Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts – as well as in the manuscripts of *Boece* and *Troilus and Criseyde* – was not a professional literary copyist but earned his living as an administrative or legal writer; see Mooney, “Chaucer’s Scribe,” 104; and Doyle and Parkes, “Paleographical Introduction,” *The Canterbury Tales: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Hengwrt Manuscript, with Variants from the Ellesmere Manuscript*, ed. Paul G. Ruggiers, Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer 1 (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1979), p.xxi. The legal connection of Chaucer’s scribe insinuates the importance of legal writing in the development of Chaucer’s poetics as well as his idea of textual instability.

⁸⁸ Chaucer, “Chaucers Wordes Unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, p.650.

⁸⁹ Strohm, “The Social and Literary Scene in England,” *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Pietro Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 12.

Chaucer's ambition for the readers of his works has been noted in the passage where he imagines his "bok" entering the realm of "poesye" (1790): "And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace / Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace" (1791-92). But as Paul Strohm observes, the "imagined transition" is accompanied by certain anxieties, whether they are about the diversity of "tonge (dialects)" or misinterpretation of the reader.⁹⁰

As Gellrich has noted, Chaucer refuses to give a "straightforward validation of meaning in an old book."⁹¹ Cultural anxieties about documentary manipulation and the unreliability of textual communication parallel skepticism about the authority of old books that Chaucer expresses in his shorter poems. In the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, the "bookish" narrator of this poem asserts that we have to believe in what the old books say since there is no way to prove their truth: "And yf that olde bokes were aweye, / Yloren were of remembraunce the keye. / Wel ought us thane honouren and beleve/ These bokes, there we han noon other preve" (Prologue, F-text, 25-29).⁹² The affirmation of written authority, however, betrays a certain sense of resignation or doubt on the narrator's part. This sense gets stronger as the narrator's reverence for the old book is immediately countered by his love of nature:

And as for me, though that I konne but lyte,
On bokes for to rede I me delyte,
And to hem yive I feyth and ful credence,
And in myn herte have hem in reverence
So hertely, that ther is game noon

⁹⁰ Strohm, "The Social and Literary Scene," 12.

⁹¹ Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book*, 25.

⁹² The narrator reconfirms his conviction in the value of old books in lines 97-102: "But wherfore that I spak, to yive credence / To olde stories and doon hem reverence, / And that men mosten more thing beleve / Then men may seen at eye, or elles preve -- / That shal I seyn, whanne that I see my tyme; / I may not al at-ones speke in ryme."

That fro my bokes maketh me to goon,
But yt be seldom on the holyday,
Save, certeynly, whan that the month of May
Is comen, and that I here the foules synge,
And that the floures gynnen for to sprynge,
Farewel my bok and my devocioun! (Prologue, F-text 29-39)

At the beginning of the Prologue, the narrator says that many people tell that “ther ys joy in hevne and peyne in helle” and that he cannot but believe in them since no man can prove it “by assay” (9). But the joy from seeing the “faire and fresshe” (55) blooms of daisy is something that the narrator himself can feel and experience. The narrator’s spontaneous love for the “fresshe songes” of the flowers contrasts to his reluctant trust in the “autoritees” (G-Text, 83).⁹³

That the Man of Law mentions the *Legend of Good Women*, out of all of Chaucer’s books, suggests a thematic link between anxieties about documentary manipulations in *The Man of Law’s Tale* and Chaucer’s doubt about written authority in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*. As Pietro Boitani has mentioned, Chaucer often describes books as “a delight, a faith, and a passion full of reverence.”⁹⁴ Chaucer’s poems, such as *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*, begin and end with a mention of books. The poet had ignored the real world around him and his neighbors until he started composing *The Canterbury Tales*. The poet’s exposure to documentary

⁹³ Chaucer’s doubts about the veracity of old books and written authority is also found in the *House of Fame*, particularly in the narrator’s account of his dreams about “Dydo and Eneas” in Book I. The narrator refers to Virgil and Ovid as the authorities for this story of Dido. The two poets’ different interpretations of the same narrative have significant bearings for the issue of textual manipulation. For a critical work on this theme in the *House of Fame*, see Sheila Delany, *Chaucer’s House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (Chicago and London, 1972).

⁹⁴ Piero Boitani, “Old Books Brought to Life in Dreams: The *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, the *Parliament of Fowls*,” *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, eds. P. Boitani and J. Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 40.

culture has shown him that a written text is susceptible to falsification and that it is easy to misrepresent reality. In *The Legend of Good Women* Chaucer questions his earlier belief in the absolute truth of textual knowledge.

R. A. Shoaf asserts that *The Man of Law's Tale* is for Chaucer an occasion to consider the "circulation and corruption of media": "When we ask who is Custance, what we hear in reply is always, unchangingly – she is constant, she is constancy itself, immune from the other, able to evade the finitude of writing."⁹⁵ From the beginning of the story, Custance is turned into a text, circulated and interpreted without any consideration of her desire and wishes. The first time we hear about her is from the Syrian merchants who transmit the story of Custance to the Sowdan of Surrye. The merchants' report transforms Custance into a story, a report, and tidings. She is a text that circulates away from the author's hand and returns home "unwemmed."⁹⁶

Shoaf's deconstructive approach to *The Man of Law's Tale* does not find historical implications embedded in this tale. If the Man of Law is afraid of circulation and consequent corruption, his fear is historically inscribed. Contemporary practices of documentary manipulation that culminated in Richard II's abuse of Gloucester's confession – and the wanton forgery of the Lancastrian government as well – taught Chaucer the instability of written communication.

"I am a man nought textueel": *The Manciple's Tale*

⁹⁵ Shoaf, "Circulation, Property, and Incest," 293.

⁹⁶ Shoaf, "Circulation, Property, and Incest," 287.

If *The Man of Law's Tale* is concerned with written communication's susceptibility to manipulations, the tale of the Manciple, who has the same legal background and inhabits the same documentary sphere as the Man of Law, exposes the falsification of spoken communication.⁹⁷ Although scholars have scarcely noted the relationship between two tales, the implications of the two different forms of linguistic manipulation that they expose are important for understanding why Chaucer denounces tale-telling in his Retraction.⁹⁸

Several elements are common to both *The Man of Law's Tale* and the *Manciple's Tale*. First, the narrators are both urban dwellers with a legal background. The Man of Law has often been at the "Parvys [the porch of St. Paul's Cathedral]" (310), and served

⁹⁷ The unreliability of human language has been one of the most frequently discussed topics of *The Manciple's Tale*. For the studies on this topic, see V. J. Scattergood, "The Manciple's Manner of Speaking," *Essays in Criticism* 24 (1974): 124-46; Louse Fradenburg, "The Manciple's Servant Tongue: Politics and Poetry in the Canterbury Tales," *ELH* 52 (1985): 85-118; Delany, "Doer of the Word: The Epistle of St. James as a Source for Chaucer's *Manciple's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review* 17 (1982): 250-254; and William Askins, "The Historical Setting of *The Manciple's Tale*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 7 (1985): 87-105. Askins reads *The Manciple's Tale* as a story about gossip and locates it in a historical moment when London's scandalmongers, such as the Cook and the Manciple, were targets of legislation. A recent issue of *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* contains a section devoted exclusively to the reading of *The Manciple's Tale*. The abuse of speech/language is one important theme common to the five articles collected in this section. Especially, see Marianne Børch, "Chaucer's Poetics and the *Manciple's Tale*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 (2003): 287-97; and John Hines, "'For sorwe of which he brak his minstralcy': The Demise of the 'Sweete Noyse' of Verse in the *Canterbury Tales*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 (2003): 299-308. Describing *The Manciple's Tale* as a "nightmare version of Chaucer's own poetics," Børch claims that the Manciple criticizes "texts that stuff truth down people's throats"; see 287 and 296. Hines also pays attention to the problem of rhetorical abuse in *The Manciple's Tale* and reads it as a "reflection upon the capacity of language and discourse to define and evaluate human transgression"; see 303.

⁹⁸ Several critics have observed some common elements to both texts, but an extensive study has never been done before. Although Wallace does not specifically talk about *The Man of Law's Tale*, his discussion of *The Manciple's Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee* notes the legal connection between *The Man of Law's Tale* and *The Manciple's Tale*. Wallace observes that *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Manciple's Tale* are overshadowed by their relationship to law. *The Tale of Melibee* was originally intended for Chaucer's Man of Law; the Manciple is a minor official who works at a London Inn of Court. Wallace claims that each tale is ultimately a "tale of Chaucer"; *The Tale of Melibee* is narrated by Chaucer the pilgrim; the Manciple's Tale features a "loquacious, court-trained, avian Chaucer surrogate in the familiar triangulated relationship of lord and master, wife, and poet"; see Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 247.

as a judge at the court of assizes, appointed by the king. A medieval manciple was a servant who purchased provisions for Inns of Court, colleges, and monasteries; in the *General Prologue* Chaucer describes the Manciple specifically as a dweller of the Inner Temple (“A gentil Maunciple was ther of a temple” (567)), whose “wit shal pace / The wisdom of an heep of lerned men (574-575).⁹⁹ He serves more than thirty masters, all of whom are “of law expert and curious” (577). But Chaucer mentions that the Manciple is able to deceive them all.

Second, both *The Man of Law’s Tale* and *The Manciple’s Tale* are placed right after the appearance of the Cook, whom Chaucer presents twice in the tale-telling game. Just like the Man of Law and the Manciple, the Cook is a city dweller who travels with five prosperous Guildsmen. In both appearances, the Cook is portrayed as an inept speaker whose failed speeches strongly contrast to the skillful tales of legally connected narrators. The Cook’s unfinished narrative in Fragment I is followed by a seamless performance by the Man of Law at whose writing “no wight [could] pynche” (*The General Prologue*, 326); in the “Prologue” to *The Manciple’s Tale*, the Cook’s lapse into silence is answered by the jangling of the Manciple.¹⁰⁰

Third, both tales feature a poet and his bird.¹⁰¹ In the “Introduction” to his tale, the Man of Law refers to himself as a magpie (the “Pierides” [91]) that emulates Chaucer.

⁹⁹ Scattergood, “The Manciple’s Manner of Speaking,” 130.

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, the Middle English word “pynche” also appears in the Manciple’s “Prologue.” Urging the Manciple to reconcile with the Cook, the Host points out that the Cook might take revenge by finding fault with his illegal dealings with victualers: “But yet, Manciple, in feith thou art to nyce, / Thus openly repreve hym of his vice. / Another day he wole, peraventure, / Reclayne thee and brynge thee to lure; / I meene, he speke wole of smale thynges, / As for to pynchen at thy rekenynges, / That were nat honest, if it cam to preef” (69-75). In both the Manciple’s “Prologue” and the Man of Law’s portrait in the *General Prologue*, the word “pynch” is used in connection with official transactions.

¹⁰¹ Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guide to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 392.

The *Manciple's Tale* focuses on Phebus and his unfortunate crow, whose gossip about the infidelity of Phebus's wife brings disastrous consequences. In both tales, the "bird" represents an unfortunate "tale-teller" who is punished for his challenge to a poet-figure.

Both texts also introduce "counterfeiters": in *The Man of Law's Tale* Donegild "countrefetes" (II. 746) letters, while in the *Manciple's Tale* the "snow-whit" (133) crow "countrefete[s] the speche of everyman" (134). The specific use of the word "countrefete" in both cases emphasizes the theme of linguistic falsification common to both texts. The acts of fictionalizing by the crow and Donegild are both condemned as treason. In *The Man of Law's Tale* the narrator calls Donegild a "traitour to hire ligeance" (III. 895). In the *Manciple's Tale*, the enraged Phebus denies the truth in the tale of the crow with a similar accusation: " 'Traitor,' quod he, 'with tonge of scorioun, / Thou hast me broght to my confusioun" (271-2). All these elements point to significant connections between these two tales, particularly in terms of their interest in language and communication.

Most important, references to texts are common in both narratives, although their narrators use them in a different way: whereas the Man of Law represents himself as a learned man and a faithful follower of textual injunctions ("Thus woloure text"), the Manciple disclaims the textuality of his tale. For instance, the Manciple denies his textuality, while referring to the words of "wise clerkes" (314): "Daun Salomon, as wise clerkes seyn, / Techeth a man to kepen his tonge weel. / But, as I seyde, I am nought textueel" (314-6). In the Middle Ages, writing was the "prerogative of an elite blessed with power and knowledge."¹⁰² According to Walsingham, writing unites all forms of

¹⁰² Georges Duby and Philippe Braunstein, *A History of Private Life: II. Revelations of the Medieval World*, ed. Georges Duby (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988), 620.

authority and distinguishes them from the “mute idiocy of the peasant.”¹⁰³ The learned sergeant seeks to differentiate himself from other pilgrims by reminding the audience of his education and textual knowledge. But this “lewed” Manciple protests that he is not “textueel” even when he is precisely making “textueel” points.

Another example is found in the Manciple’s discussion of the word “lemman” (204), a “kanavyssh speche” (205) improper for signifying a lady. Drawing on an authorial text, however, the Manciple defends his use of the word, claiming that a noble lady is not different from a woman of low-rank if she is unchaste:

The wise Plato seith, as ye may rede,
The word moot need accorde with the dede.
If men shal telle properly a thing,
The word moot cosyn be to the werkyng.
I am a boystous [plain] man, right thus seye I:
Ther nys no difference, trewely,
Bitwixe a wyf that is of heigh degree,
If of hir body dishonest she bee,
And a povre wench, oother than this. (207-215)

The Manciple’s elaborate exposition of the word “lemman” points out that a word does not have an intrinsic meaning. But he immediately retracts his insightful comments and declares that he is only an ignorant man: “But for I am a man nocht textueel / I wol nocht telle of textes never a deel; / I wol go to my tale, as I bigan” (235-37). The Manciple’s actions exhibit an intention to negate his textual knowledge.

Scattergood observes that the Manciple tends to express things in such a way as to

¹⁰³ Thomas Walsingham, *Chronicon Angliae*, ed. Edward Maunde Thompson, Rolls Series 64 (London, 1874), 308. For this specific expression, see Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 18.

deny what is being said.¹⁰⁴ Drawing on Plato, the Manciple expresses his opinion that a man's "word moot need accorde with the dede" (208). But the Manciple does exactly the opposite of what he says. For example, the Manciple concludes his tale with his mother's admonition against gossip. But the "Prologue" to his tale shows the Manciple slandering the intoxicated Cook. Pointing out how his face looks pale and his eyes dazed, the Manciple insults the Cook for the smell that stinks "ful soure" (32): "Hoold cloos thy mouth, man, by thy fader kyn! / The devel of helle sette his foot therin! / Thy cursed breeth infecte wole us alle. / Fy, stynkyng swyn! Fy, foule moote thee falle!" (37-40). The Manciple's abuse of the Cook shows that the mother's lesson to "restreyne and kepe wel [his] tongue" was totally in vain.

Whereas the Man of Law, one of the most learned narrators among the pilgrims, articulates Chaucer's anxiety about the written text, the Manciple, only a "lewed (574)" servant but more shrewd than his masters, who are in "lawe expert" (*The General Prologue*, 577), teaches us that not only writing but language itself is unreliable and subject to abuse. Wendy Scase's study of the practice of "bill-casting" in late medieval England shows that language often had "private meanings"; the word "traitor," for example, had become a "floating signifier" whose referent was totally dependent on the private will of the misadvised king.¹⁰⁵ In *The Manciple's Tale*, Phebus's speeches exemplify exactly what Scase points out in the fifteenth century political use of language:

¹⁰⁴ For critical comments on the Manciple's disclaimer, see J. Burke Severs, "Is the *Manciple's Tale* a Success?" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 51 (1952): 1-16. Severs reads the Manciple's disclaimer as stressing his lack of learning and argues that the vagueness of a man who does not know the exact sources of his quotes exhibit Chaucer's skill in adapting his tale to the narrator. See also Scattergood, "The Manciple's Manner of Speaking," 139.

¹⁰⁵ Scase, "'Strange and Wonderful Bills': Bill-Casting and Political Discourse in Late Medieval England," *New Medieval Literatures* II, eds. Copeland, Lawton, and Scase (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 235. For the late medieval bill-casters' notion of language, see my discussion in Chapter 3.

“Traitor,” quod he, “with tonge of scorpioun,
Thou hast me broght to my confusioun;
Allas, that I was wrought! Why nere I deed?
O deere wyf! O gemme of lustiheed!
That were to me so sad and eek so trewe,
Now listow deed, with face pale of hewe,
Ful giltelees, that dorste I swere, ywys!” (271-277).

Phebus calls the crow that speaks truth a “false thief” (292) and punishes him for his “false tale” (293).¹⁰⁶ Phebus’s accusation shows that there exists no fixed meaning of a word and that linguistic meaning is never free from problems of inconsistency and misunderstanding.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion: Fiction and History

Why then, of all the tales in the *Canterbury Tales*, did Chaucer advance an extended critique of documentary culture in *The Man of Law’s Tale*? What is the relationship between Chaucer and the Man of Law, as narrator? The origin of an Anglo-Norman word *narratio*, explained by Clanchy, offers a glimpse of the connection between law and literature:

¹⁰⁶ The role of the crow as an informer was often the target of criticism from the medieval pulpit: “There thrives within castle and manor-house walls another unholy throng of heralds, minstrels, jesters and other idle flatterers, who, as we have seen receive the robes and food denied to the honest beggar. These are a further source of mischief. For they spread false tales among the great, saying ‘he said such things as this,’ or ‘He did so-and-so against you,’ and thus stir up quarrels and wars”; see G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England: A Neglected Chapter in the History of English Letters and of the English People* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), 327. But rather than representing the crow as an informer, by showing how his honest words are miscommunicated and misinterpreted, and eventually bring on his own destruction, Chaucer questions the reliability of verbal activities in general.

¹⁰⁷ Gellrich, *The Ideas of the Book*, 96.

The narrator or *conteur* made the formal claim or pleading on the litigant's behalf. The pleading was called a "tale" (*narratio* in Latin or *conte* in French) just as it had been in Anglo-Saxon. The earliest written collection of common law pleadings, the *Brevia Placitata* dating from the mid-thirteenth century, calls them *les contes en romances*. Another early tract (date c. 1285) records that the pleadings are uttered by narrators in romance words and not in Latin ones. The "narrator" was thus a "romancer" a professional teller of tales in the vernacular, but his "tales" were legal pleadings and not romances in the modern sense. Yet in origin the technique of the legal narrator was probably similar to that of his namesake, the Singer of Tales, studied by Milman Parry and A. B. Lord. A narrator, whether of common law pleadings or of epic and romance, had originally reconstructed his tale in due form on the basis of a few remembered formulas. He was a professional oral remembrancer, very necessary before law and literature were committed to writing.¹⁰⁸

The roles of an advocate and a poet underwent a similar process of change. According to Clanchy, written narrative began to replace oral pleadings by the 1300s.¹⁰⁹ The change happened around the time when vernacular poets attempted to transform themselves from minstrels to "authors." The strong affinity between the roles of an "advocate" and a "poet" in late medieval society suggests a part of the environment in which Chaucer imposes an authorial image on the Man of Law and introduces the most significant metacritical comments on his own work in *The Man of Law's Prologue*.

More important, a link between the Man of Law and Chaucer the poet is found in the actions of William Rickhill, a justice of the common bench, who presented the duke's confession to the parliament. The parliamentary roll of 1399 recounts how Richard modified Gloucester's confession to support his accusation against him:

In the said parliament held at Westminster in the twenty-first year (1397), the portion of the said articles [Gloucester's confession] that pleased the

¹⁰⁸ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 221-22.

¹⁰⁹ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 222. See also n. 54 in this chapter.

king were read, and the portion of the said articles that were opposed to the intent and the purpose of the king were not read, nor known. And in addition to this, the portion of the said articles that were to the intent and purpose of the said king were proclaimed in each county of England, and that the said duke had confessed and known the said articles, so proclaimed, before William Rickhill, justice.¹¹⁰

At the time of his meeting with the duke, Rickhill cautioned him to have a copy of the document for his own records. When finally delivering the confession to the king, Rickhill asked for an official copy in case the document “might be altered or amended, or its contents damaged or erased.”¹¹¹ Rickhill’s statement reverberates with Chaucer’s concerns about the transmission of his own manuscripts expressed in “Adam the Scrivener.” His precautions were in vain, however, since the king was determined to abuse the document. Rickhill’s requests indicate his awareness that written documents could no longer claim the authority and truth once believed to reside in written texts.

Important in both Gloucester’s confession and Donegild’s counterfeit letters is the whole notion that written documents are unstable and susceptible to falsification. Both Donegild’s letters and the duke’s confession expose the instability of a written document and its “fictionality,” the inextricable intermingling of truth and falsehood.¹¹² Strohm writes that every text, whether literary or historical, is basically “fabrication or fictional narrative that reflects the ideology, desire, and aspiration of the writer himself”; documents should be treated “less as records of events than as interpretations of events, inevitably reliant to one degree or another upon invention and fictional devices.”¹¹³ In the

¹¹⁰ *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, 432. I use Giancarlo’s translation in “Murder, Lies, and Storytelling,” 87.

¹¹¹ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 222 – 3.

¹¹² For the notion of “fictionality” of historical documents, see Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow*, 6.

¹¹³ Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow*, 4-6.

willful disinformation of contemporary historical narratives, Chaucer found an emblem of writing and textual transmission in general. Gloucester's confession and Richard II's distortion of the document during its parliamentary reading provide a textual environment in which Chaucer created and circulated his works. The anxieties surrounding the proliferation of documents and the increased use of written communication in this period are all implicated in the counterfeit letters of Donegild.

CHAPTER 3: “A Pystyll of Specyallte”

Written Documents, Theater, and the Question of Spiritual Epistemology in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*

“Da Quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio
che ‘l parlar mostra, ch’a tal vista cede,
e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio.

[Thence forward my vision was greater than speech can show,
which fails at such a sight, and at such excess memory fails.]

-- Dante, *Paradiso* 33.55-57 – ¹

In 1453, William Oldhall, the duke of York’s chamberlain, and his accomplices were accused of putting up libels on doors and windows in Bury St. Edmunds. An Ipswich Jury report about this historical incident of sedition offers a glimpse of a social context in which the Digby *Mary Magdalene* was produced:

William Assheton, ... William Oldhall, ... Edmund FitzWilliam, ... Charles and Otwell Nowell ... (and others) proposing to depose the king and put the duke of York on the throne, realizing that they could not do this while he remained powerful with his lords around him, on 6th March 28 Henry VI (1450) at Bury St Edmunds plotted the death and destruction of the king and the laws and discord among the people. They agreed to take diverse bills and writings made and fabricated in sets of verse and ballads at Bury St. Edmunds and elsewhere, and placed them on men’s doors and windows, reciting in the same that the king through the counsel of the late duke of Suffolk, the bishop of Salisbury and Chichester, Lord Say and others around his person, had sold the kingdoms of England and France and the king’s uncle of France would reign in England. All this with the intention of withdrawing the love of the king’s subjects from him and moving the said duke of York to have the realm and crown of England. And they sent letters to diverse counties of England, especially

¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970-1975), 375.

Kent and Sussex, urging rebellion against the king, on account of which the duke of Suffolk was murdered.²

As an important document that bears witness to contemporary discursive practices of bill-casting, the jury report throws light on aspects of fifteenth-century East Anglian society relating to issues of communication and written culture. First, the document shows the ways that news and information circulated, as well as the government's discomfort about the subversive power of seditious rumor and gossip. It also testifies to an active textual environment in late medieval East Anglia, where written forms of communication, pasted on men's doors and windows, emerge as a familiar feature of the society. Most important, the jury's language conveys its doubt about the reliability of the rebels' written words. The jury charges that "diverse bills and writings" and "letters" were produced with a treacherous intention to bring discord between the king and his subjects and to usurp the throne; therefore, the rebels' claim that the king had sold England to France is not reliable. As the jury claims, the rebels' messages could have been fabrications with a specific propagandistic purpose. How then can we trust the jury report as a faithful record of this historical event? To what extent can we rely on the truth of its account? How impartial could the report be? Produced during a period marked by an increased use of propaganda, this document could not have been immune to factional interests and opinions. My skepticism about the validity of the Ipswich jury report increases when I

² Public Record Office, Ancient Indictments Suffolk, K. B. 9/118/30. I use the record quoted in J. R. Lander, *Wars of the Roses* (London: White Lion Publishers, 1974), 63. For a discussion of the historical event registered in this document, see Wendy Scase, "'Strange and Wonderful Bills': Bill-Casting and Political Discourse in Late Medieval England," *New Medieval Literatures* 2, ed. Rita Copeland, David Lawton, and Scase (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 225-247. Scase's article also includes examples of other contemporary bills and libels calling for the execution of Suffolk, Salisbury, and Say, who sold Normandy and misadvised the king; see, "Bill-Casting in Late Medieval England," 231.

read the Digby play of *Mary Magdalene*, in which Pilate attempts to falsify the scriptural event of Christ's Crucifixion.

Although scholars have suggested that the Digby *Mary Magdalene* was composed during the late fifteenth century and has significant connections to Bury St. Edmunds,³ a direct link between this Ipswich jury report and the play cannot be established since no external evidence exists to confirm its exact provenance. The historical event registered in the jury report, however, was neither a unique nor peculiar phenomenon of the moment. The document represents social circumstances of a late medieval England marked by a growing documentary culture's intersection with interest in news and information. While reflecting contemporary social attention to news and documents, the Digby *Mary Magdalene* offers speculations and criticism on various problems that such contemporary discursive practices might have caused.

Focusing on the letters and messengers represented in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, this chapter explores skepticism about written documents and textual authority depicted in East Anglian drama. My reading demonstrates that *Mary Magdalene* is deeply implicated in the growth of documentary culture in the late Middle Ages. In this period England was a unified nation with a central government ruling

³ On the provenance of the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, see Theresa Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 36–7; and Gail McMurray Gibson, "Bury St. Edmunds, Lydgate, and the *N-Town Cycle*," *Speculum* 56 (1981): 56-90. The Digby plays can be linked with Bury St. Edmunds through Myles Blomefylde, whose name appears in the margins of the manuscript. Blomefylde was born in Bury St. Edmunds in 1525 and seems to have been related to the William Blomefylde, who was a monk of Bury monastery. Other places that have been suggested as a likely home for *Mary Magdalene* include Norwich, King's or Bishop's Lynn, and Ipswich. See Clifford Davidson, "The Middle English Saint Play and Its Iconography," *The Saint Play in Medieval Europe*, ed. Davidson, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series, 8 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1986), 74-5; Jacob Bennett, "The *Mary Magdalene* of Bishop's Lynn," *Studies in Philology* 75 (1978): 1-9; and Glynne Wickham "The Staging of Saint Plays in England," in *Medieval Drama*, ed. Sandro Sticca (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1972), 113-5.

through sheriffs answerable to the king; its nascent bureaucratic administration operated through written instruments under the king's seal.⁴ The government's increased dependence on formalized written communication led to the growth of a class of professional messengers and the establishment of a relay system. The proliferation of royal documents contributed to the dissemination of literate habits of mind. The number of wills, letters, and household accounts produced in East Anglia during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries testifies to the growth of documentary culture in this region. Rather than celebrating the expediency of written words, however, the Digby *Mary Magdalene* demonstrates resistance to the spread of documentary culture, criticizing its inefficacy and use as a tool of oppression and bureaucratic corruption. The letters of the temporal rulers in this play exemplify such negative responses to writing and documents.

This chapter argues that resistance to and skepticism about the evidentiary value of written documents in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* is closely related to the importance of spectacle and bodily experience in East Anglian drama. Discussing the late medieval religious culture of East Anglia, Gail McMurray Gibson observes that the earlier medieval idea of the *biblia pauperum* as a justification for religious images as a "book" for the unlettered underwent a transformation during the fifteenth century.⁵ Referring to medieval illuminations of scrolls emanating from the mouths of characters, Gibson states that the controlling metaphor for religious art in the early and high Middle Ages is the "book"; and the image of the book, "the carnal medium of pages and jeweled binding," has to be overcome eventually in order to attain spiritual understanding of divine truth.

⁴ John H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History*, 3rd ed. (London: Butterworths, 1990), 11.

⁵ Gibson, *The Theatre of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 14–5.

While the argument of the *biblia pauperum* puts more emphasis on the intellectual function of religious images, the late medieval justifications for art focus more on the emotional effect of these images. The fundamental goal of fifteenth-century aesthetics is to “steryn mannys affeccioun and his herte to devocioun” through concrete images, since simple men may feel more by “syghte þan be heryng or redyngge.”⁶ The doctrine of Incarnation, which glorified God’s image in human form and likeness, received a literal interpretation in the Christian art of this period and established one of the crucial principles of the fifteenth century religious drama.

Gibson’s monumental discussion of late medieval religious culture has made the attention to visual and spectacular images essential to the study of East Anglian plays, locating them firmly in their own social and cultural contexts and triggering many important studies on spectacle.⁷ Scarcely any effort has been made, however, to read East Anglian drama in view of the conspicuous growth of documentary culture in contemporary England and its impact on late medieval theatrical productions. This chapter argues that the East Anglian saint’s play mobilizes developments in late medieval documentary culture in order to demonstrate how the visual and physical dimensions of theater give access to spiritual truths with a kind of immediacy that the written document cannot provide. Writing is an important theme in the the Digby *Mary Magdalene* because it is unstable and thereby implicitly counters a different idea of the Word, Christ. I show that in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, skeptical responses to written documents and textual

⁶ *Dives and Pauper*, vol. 1, pt. 1, ed. Priscilla Heath Barnum, EETS, o.s., 275 (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), pt. 1, p. 82.

⁷ Describing “spectacle” as the “single distinguishing theatrical characteristic” of East Anglian drama, John C. Coldewey suggests that the spectacular form originated in the drama’s function as “profit making enterprises”; see “The Non-Cycle Plays and the East Anglian Tradition,” *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 206.

authority enhance the importance of personal and bodily experience implicated in the spectacle and concrete images of medieval theater. In so doing, this chapter explores how *Mary Magdalene* turns theatrical experience into spiritual experience by appealing to the emotional impact of visual images. The spiritual experience of participating in the sacred events created by theatrical illusion offers a chance to have “close, empathetic, and communal identification” among the audience.⁸ My discussion demonstrates the religious and social role performed by the Digby *Mary Magdalene* in a period that had begun to perceive the advent of a print culture in which texts and documents flourished as never before.

Letters and Messengers

In her study of medieval mystery plays, Meg Twycross asks, “What do you not know about mystery plays if you only read the script?”⁹ Although Twycross poses this question in order to explore the importance of the visual and theatrical effects of medieval mystery plays, the same question illuminates the function of the *nuntius* figure in East Anglian drama. Barely visible in the script, the hectic movements of messengers on stage are certainly one of the prominent features of East Anglian drama. Interestingly, all the dramatic messengers in the Digby plays serve evil characters. The Digby *Killing of the Children* introduces the extra-Biblical figure of Watkyn, the messenger who joins

⁸ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982), 45.

⁹ Meg Twycross, “Beyond the Picture Theory: Image and Activity in Medieval Drama,” *Word and Image* 4 (1988): 589.

Herod's knights in persecuting the children of Israel. His role as a messenger is not conspicuous in the play, though, except in lines cancelled from the manuscript, where Watkyn enters to inform Herod that the three Magi have returned home despite their promise to come back to Herod.¹⁰ The Digby *Conversion of St. Paul* also features a messenger: Mercury is summoned by the devil Belial to report St. Paul's conversion. The scene of Mercury and Belial, with a "fying," and "crying and roryng" (s.d. 412), offers one of the most spectacular moments in the play. The Passion Play I of the N-Town cycle shows a "sarazy" (s.d. 441) messenger Arfexe, who busily moves around on stage in order to connect such evil characters as Annas, Cayphas, and the judges Rewfyn and leyon.¹¹ The most dramatic use of a messenger comes at the beginning of Passion Play II of the N-Town cycle, in which a solitary figure enters the stage, running and crying, "Tydyngys! Tydyngys! ... Jhesus of Nazareth is take. Jesus of Nazareth is take" (Play 29, s.d. 70). This unidentified messenger also performs as a mediator between Cayphas and Pylate.¹² As Twycross correctly notes, the "web of comings and goings" of the messengers in the N-Town cycle builds up the "mounting atmosphere of conspiracy and the net closing on the protagonist."¹³

¹⁰ For the cancelled lines, see the Digby *Killing of the Children* in *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS. Digby 133 and E Museo 160*, ed. Donald C. Baker, John L. Murphy, and Louis B. Hall, Jr., EETS, o.s. 283 (London: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 98-99. All quotations from the Digby plays in this chapter are from the EETS edition.

¹¹ *The N-Town Play*, 2. vols., ed. Stephen Spector, EETS, s.s. 11 and 12. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), Play 26, ll. 33-116.

¹² See *The N-Town Play*, Play 30, ll. 205-228.

¹³ Twycross, "The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays," *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 63. Twycross notes that medieval drama exploits to the full the potential for spectacle in the characters' movement about the stage; for instance, the messenger's running from one scaffold to another draws the attention of the audience. As for the atmosphere of conspiracy in Passion Play I, it is interesting that even Judas is portrayed as a "messenger" who brings to the Jews "New tydyngys" (607) that he decided to sell his Lord.

Several scholars have discussed the role of messengers in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*. Focusing on the theatrical functions of the *nuntius* figure, both Twycross and Jerome Bush observe that the messengers in *Mary Magdalene* are the only means through which the three tyrants, Tiberius, Herod, and Pilate, are connected to each other.¹⁴ The tyrants are isolated in their own small spaces, and their authority relies on the lowly figure of the messenger. The tyrants' constrained condition exposes the emptiness of their boasting claims to control expanses of land beyond their own respective *locus*. In his study on the Digby play's "place-and-scaffold" staging, Bush offers a perceptive account of the messengers' dramaturgical role. Bush explains that the *locus* (scaffold) is a localized space occupied mostly by evil tyrants or pagans, whereas the *platea* (place) allows Jesus and Mary Magdalene free movement, bridging the division not only between the characters themselves but also between dramatic characters and the audience. While scenes on the *platea* end when the actors walk off the staging area, the characters on the *loca* cannot end a scene in the same way since they cannot move.¹⁵ For the scenes on the *loca*, therefore, messengers and a call for banquets serve as convenient devices for signaling the audience that another event is about to happen elsewhere or that a scene has ended.¹⁶

¹⁴ For the discussions of the place-and-scaffold staging of medieval drama, see Twycross, "The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays," and Jerome Bush, "The Resources of *Locus* and *Platea* Staging: The Digby *Mary Magdalene*," *Studies in Philology* 86 (1989): 139-165.

¹⁵ For a critique of Bush's explanation, see Victor Scherb, "Worldly and Sacred Messengers in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*," *English Studies* 73 (1992): 3, n. 13. Scherb correctly points out that the sending of a messenger to the Flesh serves no practical dramatic purpose, except to provide visual emphasis for the messenger motif. The awkward use of messengers in the scene of the World, Flesh, and Devil exposes the inefficacy of a communicative system that depends on the mediation of messengers.

¹⁶ A call for a banquet is important not only theatrically but also artistically, since the banquet scenes become a significant part of the play's meaning, charged with the symbolism of the Eucharist. Scholars have noted repetition of motifs in the play and observed that the recurrent images contribute to developing

Challenging Bush's assessment of the messengers as a "cumbersome system" generated by the dramaturgical exigencies of the place-and-scaffold staging, Victor Scherb notes that beyond the "obvious dramatic function" of allowing each tyrant to remain in contact with one another, the repetitive symbolic action of the *nuntius* figures traces the "Christianization of the European world."¹⁷ Identified as the fallen world, the acting area occupied by the criss-crossing of the secular messenger in the first half of the play begins to receive the Christian message brought by Mary, the divine messenger, in the latter half. As the first person to spread the word of Christ's resurrection, Mary's symbolic image as the "bearer of Good News" extends beyond the biblical story to include her role as an early Christian missionary, converting the king and queen of Marcyll.¹⁸

While Scherb's detailed analysis of the text correctly points to the thematic and theatrical significance of the messenger, it fails to present the play as a product of a certain historical moment. As Theresa Coletti asserts, the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, as well as other medieval plays, stands in "dynamic relationship to the society that produced

and reinforcing the difference between secular and spiritual meanings of each motif. Food, clothing, messengers, salutation, pilgrimages, and sovereignty are examples of the images and themes repeated in *Mary Magdalene*. On symbolic meanings of the banquet scenes and clothing, see Coletti, "The Design of the Digby Play of *Mary Magdalene*," *Studies in Philology* 76 (1979): 313-333; on the theme of pilgrimage, see Scott Boehnen, "The Aesthetics of 'Sprawling' Drama: The Digby *Mary Magdalene* as Pilgrim's Play," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 98 (1999): 325-52; and for the discussion of salutations and the issue of sovereignty, see John W. Velz, "Sovereignty in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*," *Comparative Drama* 2 (1968): 32-43.

¹⁷ Scherb, "Worldly and Sacred Messengers," 1.

¹⁸ Scherb, "Worldly and Sacred Messengers," 4; see also Clifford Davidson, "The Digby *Mary Magdalene* and the Magdalene Cult of the Middle Ages," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 13 (1972): 83.

it.”¹⁹ Far from simply representing a “stable, transhistorical realm of Christian values,” medieval drama mirrors and interacts with contemporary social and political concerns.²⁰

Drawing on Coletti’s historical approaches to late medieval English drama, I consider the Digby *Mary Magdalene* as a theatrical space in which different cultural and social forces intersect. Whereas Bush, Twycross, and Scherb have explored theatrical and theological meanings of the *nuntius* figure, my reading pays attention to aspects of contemporary medieval society represented by the dramatic messengers and the letters they deliver. The relay system of messengers was an emblem of absolutism, and English monarchs spared no cost in order to get much needed information.²¹ The material reward received by the messengers in *Mary Magdalene* points to a social critique of a costly relay system that served secular power while imposing a serious burden on public finances. The drama’s critical stance becomes more visible if we investigate how it develops the motif of the letter. Recurrent images of letters in the play implicate various social and political concerns of contemporary society: the late medieval interest in news and information, the spread of documentary culture, and the consequent skepticism about written texts.

¹⁹ Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints*, 11; and eadem, “‘*Paupertas est donum Dei*’: Hagiography, Lay Religion, and the Economics of Salvation in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*,” *Speculum* 76 (2001): 339. Coletti criticizes studies of the saint play that have focused on reproducing “medieval ideologies of sainthood that elide historical differences in order to emphasize larger designs of Christian history.” For a detailed overview of recent developments in the studies of medieval sainthood and drama that explore their investments in contemporary politics and ideology, see Coletti’s recent work on late medieval lay society’s religious and economical aspirations embedded in the dramatic representation of Mary Magdalene, “The Economics of Salvation in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*,” 338-39.

²⁰ Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints*, 27.

²¹ C. A. J. Armstrong, “Some Examples of the Distribution and Speed of News in England at the Time of the Wars of the Roses,” *Studies in Medieval History Presented to Frederick Maurice Powicke*, ed. R. W. Hunt, W. A. Pantin, and R. W. Southern (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), 440. On the spiritual implications of the reward to the messengers, see Scherb, “Worldly and Sacred Messengers,” 4.

Contextualizing the Text

Textual metaphors abounding in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, attesting to the intellectual and literate culture of East Anglia that boasted one of the greatest centers of ecclesiastical learning in medieval England.²² Home of many monks trained in Oxford, the Benedictine abbey of St. Edmunds owned a library with two thousand manuscripts, making it in the fifteenth century second only to Oxford.²³ East Anglia laid claim to many prominent medieval writers and texts: Julian of Norwich described her mystical experience in *The Revelation of Love* expounding important theological points; Margery Kempe dictated her *Book*, a quasi-autobiography recording her religious acts. East Anglia was also home to Osbern Bokenham, whose *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* evidences the region's strong interest in female spirituality. Though not from East Anglia, the most prolific writer of late medieval England John Lydgate spent most of his life as a monk at the Benedictine Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds. Gibson claims Lydgate's involvement with the production of East Anglian drama, suggesting his authorship of parts of N-Town cycle.²⁴ Other East Anglian authors include John Norwich, who wrote the *Tractus de*

²² For discussions of literate culture in East Anglia during the late Middle Ages, see Richard Beadle, "Prolegomena to a Literary Geography of Later Medieval Norfolk," *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts: Essays Celebrating the Publication of a Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English*, ed. Felicity Riddy (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991): 89-107; Coldewey, "The Non-Cycle Plays and the East Anglian Tradition," 192; Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints*, 6-10; and Scherb, *Staging Faith: East Anglian Drama in the Later Middle Ages* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001), 23-29.

²³ Gibson, "Bury St. Edmunds," 68.

²⁴ Gibson, "Bury St. Edmunds," 90. Gibson points to Bury St. Edmunds as the provenance of the *N-Town*

modo inuendiendi orante verba; the poet John Metham, author of the romance *Amoryus and Cleopes*; and the chronicler and hagiographer John Capgrave, Austin Friar of Lynn.²⁵

Not only professional writers but also numerous lay people contributed to nurturing textual culture by actively participating in the discursive practice of written communication as literary patrons, testators, and letter-writers. The number of wills and letters produced by prosperous gentry and noble readers and patrons of this region attest to these people's investment in documentary culture, as well as refined literary taste. John Baret, a wealthy Bury St. Edmunds clothier, seems to have been one of the patrons for whom a fine presentation manuscript of Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* was made; Lydgate's pension documents show that the poet wrote a letter to Henry VI requesting that half of his royal pension be given to Baret.²⁶ The names of John Baret and the Pastons also figure in discussions of the Ellesmere manuscript of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.²⁷

The activities of East Anglian laywomen as readers, owners, and patrons of literature are also well documented. One of these laywomen book-owners was Ann Harling of Harling, Norfolk, who was notable for her learning. She borrowed from John Paston II *The Book of Troilus* and owned several copies of devotional and literary works, including Christine de Pizan's *Epistre d'Othea*.²⁸ According to Gibson, Harling belonged

Cycle.

²⁵ For a scholarly effort to locate *Mary Magdalene* in the discursive framework of contemporary religious writing, see Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints*. Noting the contemporaneous appearance of religious writings and dramatic texts, Coletti asserts that medieval drama should be investigated in light of important developments in late medieval textual culture; see p 7.

²⁶ Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion*, 74.

²⁷ Ralph Hanna III, and A. S. G. Edwards, "Rotheley, the De Vere Circle, and the Ellesmere Chaucer," *Reading from the Margins: Textual Studies, Chaucer, and Medieval Literature*, ed. Seth Lerer (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1996), 11-35.

²⁸ Christine de Pizan's *Epistre d'Othea* was translated and introduced by Stephen Scrope, stepson of Sir

to an East Anglian “bookish” club presided over by Alice Chaucer, Duchess of Suffolk and granddaughter of the poet, Geoffrey Chaucer.²⁹ Osbern Bokenham’s *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* also evidences women’s contribution to the growth of a regional literary culture. Carol Meale points out that in Bokenham’s book, six of the thirteen legends were explicitly written for East Anglian laywomen.³⁰ Among them are Isabel Bouchier, countess of Eu, and Elizabeth de Vere, countess of Oxford, whom Bokenham identifies as the patrons of the legends of Saint Mary Magdalene and Elizabeth of Hungary.

The region’s close connection to contemporary legal circles was one of the most crucial factors in the establishment of its literate culture. Despite vehement attacks on legal corruption and the abuse of justice, the contribution of legal professions to the intellectual and cultural development of late medieval English society can hardly be denied.³¹ E. W. Ives states that the educational construction of the Inns of Court was “the most significant cultural development in fifteenth century England.”³² Although the

John Fastolf, who had close connections with the Pastons. The pattern of human interconnectedness in the production and circulation of manuscripts indicates the existence of an extensive but still locally affiliated textual and literary community. For the Norfolk literary “coterie” associated with Sir John Fastolf, see Samuel Moore, “Patrons of Letters in Norfolk and Suffolk, c. 1450,” *PMLA* 27 (1912): 188-207 and 28 (1913): 79-105; and Beadle, “Prolegomena to a Literary Geography of Later Medieval Norfolk,” 98-99.

²⁹ Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion*, 96.

³⁰ Carole Meale, “‘... all the bokes that I haue of laty, englisch, and frensch’: Laywomen and their Books in Late Medieval England,” *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 138.

³¹ The link between the legal profession and the spread of literacy has attracted the attention of many scholars. See M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972; 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 21-28; Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), xiv; Malcolm B. Parkes, “The Literacy of the Laity,” *The Medieval World*, ed. David Daiches and A. Thorlby (London: Aldus Book, 1973), 555-77; and E. W. Ives, “The Common Lawyers,” *Profession, Vocation, and Culture in Later Medieval England*, ed. Cecil H. Clough (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), 181-217.

³² The Inns of Court was also an important center of dramatic activities in late medieval England. The record shows that Lincoln’s Inn regularly celebrated Christmas festivities with professional players and

individual Inns of Court took members from all parts of the country, each also had special connections with particular regions, probably because of the practical matter of sponsors. For instance, Lincoln's Inn had a high proportion of students from East Anglia because lawyers from Lincoln's Inn became patrons and sent local students to the institution they had attended.³³ The region's connection with this legal institution furnishes a clue to an intellectual and written culture relatively more mature than those of other regions of contemporary England; compared to other Inns of Court, Lincoln's Inn in the fifteenth century had a highly developed educational system concentrating on learning legal texts.³⁴

Fifteenth-century East Anglia was one of the most litigious regions in England, producing many London-educated lawyers. The Pastons and Townsends are two of many notable lawyer families of East Anglia, whose investment in, as well as contributions to, the growth of this region's documentary culture was enormous. As we have seen, the Pastons composed and preserved massive numbers of letters and documents, whose prolific and vivid accounts manifest the writers' desire to keep accurate records of their everyday lives. The family's deep trust in the value of written evidence is channeled through their many letters.³⁵ The Townshends were also famous for their meticulous

minstrels; see Ives, *The Common Lawyers of Pre-Reformation England, Thomas Kebell: A Case Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 38; and "The Common Lawyers," 183-185.

³³ Ives, *The Common Lawyers of Pre-Reformation England*, 36. Records show that both Roger Townshends, the father and son, attended Lincoln's Inn; see C. E. Moreton, *The Townshends and Their World: Gentry, Law, and Land in Norfolk c. 1450-1551* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 10.

³⁴ For a detailed discussion of the evolution of legal education at Lincoln's inn, see Ives, "The Common Lawyers," 206-207.

³⁵ For a detailed discussion of the Pastons' obsession for documentary evidence, see my chapter on the Paston Letters.

record-keeping; their extant personal records cataloguing all the deeds and evidences relating to their property communicate their investment in documentary culture.³⁶

The spread of literacy and the conspicuous growth of written culture had an impact on forms of social communication in late medieval East Anglia. Personal letters, as well as bills and schedules, radiated across the country in order to transmit news about international and domestic affairs. For instance, in October 1450 William Wayte, clerk to William Yelverton, enclosed in his letter to John Paston a copy of a bill written by the duke of York demanding that Henry VI take active measures to prevent the country from falling apart. In his letter, Wayte asked John Paston to paste the bill all over Norwich so that it would be known to as many people as possible: “Syr, I sende yow a copy of the bylle that my Lord of Yorke putte unto the Kyng, and syr, late copyes go abowte the cetye j-now, for the love of God.”³⁷ Certainly the audience targeted by Wayte would have been those people who could read and understand the bill; yet even for the illiterate, the written document pasted all over the city became a familiar feature of everyday life.

Clanchy considers writing as a “technology” newly developed during the late Middle Ages.³⁸ While the gentry and aristocrats who had an urgent need for information

³⁶ Moreton, *The Townshends and Their World*, 10. Both the Pastons and the Townshends were also enthusiastic book collectors; on each family’s ownership of books, see G. A. Lester, “The Books of a Fifteenth-Century English Gentleman, Sir John Paston,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 88 (1987): 200-217; and Moreton, “The Library of a Late Fifteenth Century Lawyer,” *The Library* 6 (1991): 338-46.

³⁷ Around the year William Wayte’s letter was written, the Duke of York was serving as Lieutenant of Ireland, and England was suffering from the murder of Duke of Suffolk and a major popular rebellion. In August 1450 York returned from Ireland to London with a considerable force and urged upon the king reforms in government to prevent the country from falling apart. The copy of York’s letter is written in the hand of Wayte. See *The Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Norman Davis, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), no. 460 and no. 460A, 2: 47-50.

³⁸ On writing as a kind of “technology,” see Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 88-115 ; and Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 81-83. Pointing out that Plato also considered writing as an external and alien technology, Ong compares writing to printing and the computer of modern society.

exploited and relied on writing's potential as a reliable and speedy means of communication, social resistance against this new "technology" seems to have been as strong. Specifically, the massive circulation of propaganda during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries generated skepticism about the ways that writing could be abused and easily manipulated.³⁹ Narratives of contemporary propaganda show that truth, intermingled with falsehood, is hard to discern.

Richard III, for instance, put strenuous effort into projecting his image as a "moral" king by issuing proclamations about the "repression of immorality."⁴⁰ Richard III's proclamation of 1484 is reminiscent of Tiberius's claim to legitimacy and virtue in his first rant in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*: "I am þe blod ryall most of soverente -- / Of all emperowers and kyngys my byrth is best / ... All grace vpon erth from my goodness commit fro, / And þat bryngis all pepell in blysse so" (9-10, 17-18). Boasting that his "goodness" bestows happiness to his subjects, Tiberius the emperor calls those who deny his authority "harlottys [obscene and base villains]" (26). Just like Tiberius, in his proclamation directed against Henry Tudor and his supporters, Richard attacked Jasper Tudor, John de Vere, and many others as "open murders, adulterers, and extorcioners." According to the proclamation, these men had sought to "abuse and blind the commons of this said realm" by choosing as their captain Henry Tudor, who was involved in double adultery "as every man knoweth"; they were intent on subverting the laws of the realm,

³⁹ According to Bernard Guenée, in about 1485 insubstantial pamphlets began to appear, printed at minimum expense on mediocre or even very poor quality paper. The pamphlets lacked the authority of the sacred written word, which might have intensified negative responses to written documents; see *States and Rulers in Later Medieval Europe* (Oxford; New York: Blackwell, 1985), 29.

⁴⁰ Charles Ross, "Rumour, Propaganda, and Popular Opinion During the Wars of the Roses," *Patronage, The Crown, and the Provinces*, ed. R.A. Griffiths (Gloucester, UK/ Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Alan Sutton/Humanities Press, 1981), 28.

and doing the most cruel murders and slaughters that had ever be seen in a Christian realm. In so stating, Richard III urged that all “true and natural Englishmen” should support the “well-willed, diligent and courageous prince [Richard III]” who took pains for the comfort and well-being of his subjects.⁴¹ Richard III’s propaganda, however, appears to have been a failure. The king who publicly acknowledged two bastards and was believed to have murdered his nephews was never trusted by the people. Richard’s proclamation shows only the vulnerability of writing to abuse and manipulation.

The textual activities of the three tyrants in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, all engaged with reading, writing, and interpreting documents, represent increasing East Anglian investments in textual and written culture. Tiberius dictates to the Provost his letter to Herod and Pilate, requesting information about Christians disobedient to his rule; later Pilate replies to Tiberius’s request in writing. Associated only with evil characters, the textual activities of these tyrants convey negative implications. For instance, the reading of the Scripture by Herod and his philosophers illustrates problems in their textual activities. The main action of Herod’s first appearance on stage is his “show-stopping fit” upon hearing the philosophers’ interpretation of the scriptural prophecy.⁴² A raging Herod, who expected flattering words from them confirming his sovereignty, threatens Christ and his followers with flaying and murder when the philosophers quote the Scripture that “a myty duke xal rese and reyn / Whych xall reyn and rewle all Israell. / No kyng azens hys worthynes xall opteyn” (180-2). In this scene, the speeches of both Herod and his philosophers show that these characters consider the Scripture only as a

⁴¹ Ross, “Rumour, Propaganda, and Popular Opinion,” 28-9.

⁴² Bush, “The Resources of *Locus* and *Platea* Staging,” 158.

document; they fail to perceive the spiritual message of the Gospel since they interpret it only literally.⁴³ Herod's limited understanding cannot make a hermeneutic leap between the secular and the spiritual "duke" (180); Herod thereby erroneously compares himself to God. Herod and the philosophers' misreading of the Scripture foreshadows Jesus' critique of "clerical knowledge" based on "naked reason."⁴⁴ Before complying with Mary and Martha's request to aid Lazarus in his deathbed, Jesus explains that the resurrection of Lazarus is a divine mystery that cannot be comprehended by clerical learning. Such expressions of doubt about "clerical learning" echo the attitude of late medieval mystical and contemplative literature that challenged the "established clerical claims to authority" based on knowledge and reason.⁴⁵ The dramatic emphasis on the inadequacy of clerical

⁴³ The negative implications of the three tyrants' textual activities seem to have some relation to the Lollard movement during the late Middle Ages. Interestingly, Wycliff employs the analogy of a scribe's letters and their meaning in order to counter the argument that his views on the Eucharist will lead the people to lose faith in it: "The following concrete example will demonstrate how bare and absurd is the argument that if it were to remain bread it might signify the substance of bread more than the body of Christ: When scribes scribble letters, phrases, and statements on a material surface, these remain as a material overlay and by their accidents signify the overlay itself. And yet these accidents, set down in order to convey meaning to those who by skill and other natural qualities understand letters, signify in a far more fundamental and noteworthy manner than the material forms signify themselves, insofar that what the layperson take as a natural signification is of worth to the cleric. So much the more should the quality of faith lead the faithful to understand through the consecrated bread the true body of Christ"; the passage quoted in Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, 284. Wycliff's analogy emphasizes the need for a hermeneutic leap between *signified* and *signifier*, an idea indebted to the growth of a literate mentality of the period. But the philosophers' interpretation of the scriptural passage and Herod's response show that written letters hardly stimulate spiritual understanding of the *signified*. Lollard heresy trials continued throughout the fifteenth century, and persecution of the Lollards in East Anglia was especially severe during the second quarter of the century. Produced in the period of intensive religious controversy, the Digby *Mary Magdalene* might echo some of the theological arguments concerning the Lollards. On the connection between the Lollard movement and the production of East Anglian drama, see Janette Dillon, *Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 27 and 56-7.

⁴⁴ Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, quoted in Coletti's *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints*, 121.

⁴⁵ Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints*, 122.

claims signals a rejection of “institutional discourse, including learning, letters, and textual authority.”⁴⁶

“A Pystyll of Specyallte”

The Digby *Mary Magdalene*'s attention to contemporary politics and society is evident in the episodes that have no counterparts in other versions of the life of Mary Magdalene.⁴⁷ For instance, with the conspicuous presence of messengers, the courts of Tiberius, Herod, and Pilate and the scenes of the Devil, World, and Flesh accommodate the play's thematic focus on the problem of documentary manipulation and medieval interest in news. Scott Boehnen correctly observes that the Digby *Mary Magdalene* begins not with the “long-haired Magdalene” but with a “royally dressed king.”⁴⁸ Beyond the theatrical function of preparing for the beginning of a drama by commanding silence from the audience, Tiberius's rant in the opening scene recalls the anxiety that the government revealed in the Ipswich jury report, especially its discomfort about the subversive power of rumor: “Yff ony þer be to my goddys [dys]obedient, / Dyssevyr tho harlottys and make to me declaracyon. / And I xall make all swych to dye, / Thos

⁴⁶ Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and the Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 86; see also Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints*, 122.

⁴⁷ Different Middle English versions of the life of Mary Magdalene can be found in the *Legenda Aurea* and vernacular works derived from it, such as the *South English Legendary*, Mirk's *Festial*, and Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*. Scherb notes that none of these versions includes an episode comparable to the scenes of Tiberius, Herod, and Pilate, or the messengers running between them; see “Worldly and Sacred Messengers,” 5.

⁴⁸ Boehnen, “The Aesthetics of ‘Sprawling’ Drama,” 331-32. Boehnen explains that the opening of the play replicates the conventional characterization of the devil as usurper of God's throne; the dramatist presents Tiberius as an “anti-saint” usurping the opening scene of the play of Saint Mary Magdalene.

precharse of Crystys incarnacyon!” (25-8). The definitions of the Middle English word “harlottys” demonstrate the word’s close association with linguistic disruption; Tiberius’s references to “harlottys” and “precharse of Crystys incarnacyon” take on importance as a commentary on contemporary society buzzing with seditious news and information.⁴⁹ Apparently, Tiberius is confident about his authority as the “chyff rewar” (4) whom nobody could disobey. Yet his claim to dominion is unsettled by his awareness of possible subversion, and his first dramatic act as emperor is a demand for information about people rebellious to his rule. When the Provost promptly responds to his demand for “information” (29), Tiberius exclaims “Lo how all þe word obeyit my domynacyon!” (30). But his next speech about his fear of Christ who is yet to be born but “dare [him] dysseobey” (31) reveals the groundlessness of his own sense of power and authority.

A similar scene occurs in Herod’s palace. Despite Herod’s boast about his authority as the “grettest governowur” (166), in his rant looms the fear of subversion and of “woys” spread “prevely or pertely” (204-5) throughout the land. The tyrants’ concerns about rebels who disobey the king and the law are reminiscent of the Ipswich jury’s indictment quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The report writes that William Oldhall and his associates attempted to “destroy the law and the king” and “promoted division and hatred” by circulating “diverse bills and writings” containing false information about the king. Herod’s fear of usurpation by a “myty duke [that] xal rese and reyn [Israel]” (180) resonates with the jury’s charge that the treasonous rebels moved “the said duke of York to have the realm and crown of England.”

⁴⁹ According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, the word “harlotrie” was used for “low and ribald talk.” A “Harlot” sometimes refers to a “professional story teller” and a “messenger” with contemptuous overtones; s.vv. *harlotrie* and *harlot*.

In the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, letter-writing, represented mostly as an activity of the secular power, signals East Anglian dramatic engagement with the social and political functions of writing. The letter, first of all, symbolizes an instrument of domination.⁵⁰ Condemning anyone who speaks against the emperor and preaches “Crystys incarnacyon” (28), Tiberius conveys to Herod and Pilate his will to suppress seditious voices in the form of written documents. The *Conversion of St. Paul* also illustrates negative aspects of letters and writing. Before leaving for Damascus, Saul asks Anna and Caypha to grant him “letters and epystolys of most soverente” (38) that might bestow upon him the power and authority to subdue people transgressing against the law. Anna’s reply makes a connection between power and writing: “by thes letturs that be most reverent -- / Take them in hand, full agre therto -- / Constreyne all rebellys by owur [w]hole assent; / We gyf yow full power so to doo” (50-53). Saul believes that the letters of Anna and Caypha will give him full “proteccyon” (42) during his mission against the Christians. But his subjection and conversion by divine voice reveal the emptiness of a written authority that stands in contrast to God’s promise that he will provide “socor in every dere, / That no maner of yll shal betide” (193-4).

⁵⁰ Late medieval hostility toward the legal profession and documents is well attested in Walsingham’s chronicle on rebels’ acts during the English Rising of 1381: “They [the rebels] began to show forth what they had premeditated and utterly without reverence, they began beheading all lawyers and apprentices, as well as the justices themselves, and all jurors of the countryside that they could find, saying that the land would never rejoice in its original liberty until they were all dead. This pleased the peasants mightily, and (moving from small things to great) they ordered that all court rolls and muniments be cast into the flames, so that the memory of ancient things would vanish, and their lords would never again have a law to punish them with”; *Chronicon Angliae*, 287, translated and quoted in Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 44. Justice maintains that the rebels’ burning of documents demonstrates their understanding of writing as a tool of oppression and their desire to reform all kinds of “parchment bureaucracy.” For medieval dramatic representations of Pilate, see *The Towneley Plays*, 2 vols, ed. A. C. Cawley and Martin Stevens. EETS s.s. 13-14 (Oxford: University Press, 1994); see also Arnold Williams, *Characterization of Pilate in the Towneley Plays* (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1950), 37-51. Although attacks on legal corruption – avarice, bribery, injustice – abundant in late medieval sermons and literary texts, such as *Piers Plowman*, *Vox Clamantis*, *Mum and the Sothsegger*, and the Townley plays, focusing on the vice of forgery is unique in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*.

The negative response to bureaucratic writing and documents in the Digby plays finds a correspondence in the images of “scribe-devils” immensely popular in the church art of Western Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁵¹ The Digby dramatist’s representation of Tiberius’s “textual tyranny” seems to have been influenced by the image of the scribe-devil Tutivillus, lurking in a church nave with a pen ready to record human sins on a scroll.⁵² Painted on walls or carved on pillars, the figure of Tutivillus mostly spies on female worshippers gossiping during sermons. Just as the devil served a useful purpose for the preacher who sought to control his audience, in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* Serybyl, the scribe of Tiberius, performs a similar function of controlling seditious people: “Syrybbe, I warne yow, se þat my lawys / In all your partyys have dew obeysavns! / Inquere and aske, eche day þat davnys / Yf in my pepul be fovnd ony weryouns / Contrary to me in ony chansse, / Or wyth my goldyn goddys grocth or grone! / I woll marre swych harlottys wyth mordor and myschance!” (33-9). Serybyl promises Tiberius that he will search out those who “gossip (“grocth or grone” [38]) about the emperor.

Camille claims that the association of writing with demonic power occurred at precisely the period when the symbolic value and social role of writing were undergoing profound change.⁵³ The image of the satanic scribe began to appear in illuminations of medieval court scenes during the late thirteenth century, when the scribe’s role in

⁵¹ For different images of “literate devils,” see Michael Camille, “The Devil’s Writing: Diabolic Literacy in Medieval Art,” *World Art: Themes of Unity in Diversity*, ed. Irving Lavin (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 359-60.

⁵² Camille, “Devil’s Writing,” 357. For a detailed discussion of Titivillus in late medieval texts, see Kathleen M. Ashley, “Titivillus and the Battle of Words in *Mankind*,” *Annale Medievale* 16 (1975): 128-50.

⁵³ Camille, “Devil’s Writing,” 355.

administration and law had gained remarkable significance. Depicting a scribe as a demon suggests social suspicion and even repulsion against the oppressive power of a legal document that “damns rather than saves” life.⁵⁴

In *Mary Magdalene* the letter also functions as a medium for consolidating intimate relationships among the evil rulers. Since exchanging letters to maintain social networks was a new and useful practice in this period, the dramatic employment of letters to connect the three tyrants firmly locates this play in the context of late medieval political society.⁵⁵ Pilate’s letter about the Passion of Christ serves to recuperate his relationship to Herod: “A, be my trowth, now am I full of blys! / Þes be mery tydvngys þat þey have þus don! / Now certys I am glad of þis, / For now ar we frendys þat afore wher fon” (1285-8). Pilate’s letter also gives him a chance to express his loyalty and commitment as exemplified in the messenger’s address to Tiberius: “He [Pilate] sent yow word wyth lowly intent; / In ewery place he kepytt yower cummavndement, / As he is bovnd be hys ofyce” (1301-1303). On his second appearance, Tiberius announces to the counselors (“Syr provost, and skrybe, juggys of my rem” [114]) his intention to send letters to Herod:

IMPERATOR. ...
Myn entent I woll hem teche.
Take he[e]d, thou provost, my precept wretyn be,
And sey, I cummaund hem as they woll be [wyth]owt wrech,
Yf ther be ony in the cuntre ageyn my law doth prech,
Or ageyn my goddys ony trobyll tellys,
That thus agens my lawys rebellys,

⁵⁴ Camille, “The Devil’s Writing,” 355.

⁵⁵ Barbara A. Hanawalt, “Lady Honor Lisle’s Networks of Influence,” *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 196. For the medieval idea of the letter as a “token of love” and “gift to the recipient,” see Constable, *Letters and Letters-Collection*, 15-16.

As he is regent and in that reme dwellys,
And holdyth hys crown of me be ryth,
Yff ther be ony harlettys that agens me make replycacyon
Or ony moteryng ayens me make wyth malynacyon. (119-128)

The letter specifies Herod's subordinate position ("Herowdes, þat regent þer ondyr me" [117]) and warns him to find out "harlettys" since he holds his crown "of me [Tiberius] be ryth" (126). Tiberius employs language to wield power over his subordinates, asserting that Herod and Pilate have to follow his command if "they woll be [wyth]owt wrech" (121).

Although Tiberius fills his letter with threats reminding Herod and Pilate of their duty, the message loses its tyrannical voice in the words of the messenger. He delivers the letter with extreme courtesy, replacing such words as "cummaund" (121) and "teche" (119) with "desyrth" and "preyith" (215). Moreover, both Herod and Pilate receive Tiberius's message as a token of love. Herod vows that "for hys love" (221) nothing will be spared to accomplish the imperial command. Tiberius's demand that Herod should collect information about seditious "harlettys" (127) turns into a civil request to work on behalf of the emperor: "He [Tiberius] desyrth yow and preyit[h] on eche party [in every particular] / To fulfill hys commaundment and desire" (215-6). In Pilate's court, the messenger addresses Pilate as Tiberius's "lovyr dere" (253), appointed to the "state of judgment" (256) in order to secure imperial law. He revises the message again in order to emphasize the emperor's desire for "strenthyng of hys lawys cleyr" (255) while alleviating the threat contained in Tiberius's solemn warning that Pilate should "make inqyrans in every cuntre" (134) if he wishes to stay unharmed. Pilate receives the letter

with “grete reverens” (s.d. 256), as if the letter is the emperor himself rather than words written on a piece of sheepskin.

Pilate’s reverent gesture carries a spiritual connotation, closely associated with the biblical concept of Jesus as a token of love, God’s communication of himself to humanity in the person of the Word.⁵⁶ Tiberius’s message emphasizing duty and obedience stands in opposition to the unconditional love of God that forgives even the most wretched sinners. In his letter, Tiberius reminds Pilate and Herod of their obligation to follow the imperial order since they “holdyth [their] crown of me by ryth” (126). Jesus the “King” (753), however, has pity on his “creacyown”(753) and saves Mary Magdalene who has been “drynychyn in synne deversarye” (754). Tiberius subordinates Herod and Pilate with the threat of death; Jesus holds Mary in “obessyawmse” (765) with love and “sokour” (763): “Grace to me he wold nevyr denye; / Thowe I were nevyr so sinful, he seyde, ‘Revertere’! / O, I sinful creature, to grace I woll aplye; / The oyle of mercy hath helyd myn infyrmyte” (756-757). Tiberius’s self-centered and aggrandizing words underscore the distance between the degenerated language of human beings and the Word, the incarnate voice of God that communicates love and establishes the bonds of a holy community.

⁵⁶ For the idea of Christ’s body as a divine “charter,” see *Pore Caitif*, folios. 141^v-152^r, quoted in Nicholas Watson, “Conceptions of the Word: The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God,” *New Medieval Literatures I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 106: “Every wyse man that claynmeth his heritage eyther axith gret pardon kepith besily and hath ofte mynde upon the charter of his chalange. And therfor eche man lerne to lyve virtuously and kepe and have mynde upon the charter of hevене blisse, and studye stedfastly the wyt of thys bille, for pardon therof shal dure withouten ende. Understonde wel that the charter of this heritage and the bulle [proclamation] of this everlastyng pardon is our lord Jhesu Cryst, wretonn with al the might and vertu of God. The parchemyn of this hevenly charter is neither of sheep nor of calf, but it ys the body and the blessed skyn of our lord Jhesu, that lombe that nevere was spotted with wem of synne. And was there nevere skyn of sheep nor of calf so sore and hard streyned on the teyntour [rack] or harrow of ony parchemyn maker as was this blessed body and suete skyn of our lord Jhesu Crist for oute love streyned and drawn upon the gebat [gibbet] of the cros.” This passage illustrates a strong investment in documentary culture that conceives Christ in terms of a document. As Watson correctly observes, however, this passage “demonizes” writing by associating it with the act of killing Christ.

Bernard of Clairvaux explains that human speech is “the vital bond of an orderly society, a bulwark against division,” but at the same time, the “conclusive proof of [human being’s] intrinsic disunity.”⁵⁷ Jesus the Word conveys peace and unity, but Tiberius’s letter only aggravates the “divisioun” that he seeks to redress in vain. The first appearance of Jesus strongly contrasts to that of Tiberius. While Tiberius’s first utterance commands silence from the audience, Jesus’ first speech expresses his appreciation for Simon’s hospitality. Tiberius’s language mostly emphasizes discrepancies and disunity; he claims that nobody stands “egall” to his magnificence; he is a “soveren of al soverens” (6), and his power is “incomparable” (7). Tiberius orders his Provost and Serybyl to “dyssevyr” (26) those preaching “weryouns” (36) against him. Whereas Tiberius’s stage emphasizes exclusion and hostility, Simon’s house symbolizes inclusion and spiritual bond. Tiberius threatens not only foes but also friends who dare to “agaynsay” his “magnyfycens” (13), but Simon invites his friends to “chyre” (575) and “solas” (573). The humble abode that Jesus enters with “pes and vnyte” (620) stands in strong contrast to the extensive territory of which Tiberius boasts. Though small, it is the place where God gladly takes a rest since “wythinne [the] hows xall rest charyte, / And þe bemys of grace xal byn illumynows” (622-3).

The tyrants’ letters also epitomize the unreliability of degenerated human language. Specifically, the composition and circulation of Pilate’s letter point to social anxiety about problems of documentary misinformation and abuse. After the Resurrection of Christ, Pilate asks his sergeants for advice on how to inform Tiberius of the truth of the event. The dramatist’s anachronistic substitution of contemporary figures

⁵⁷ Patrick J. Gallacher, *Love, the Word, and Mercury: A Reading of John Gower’s Confessio Amantis* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975), 24.

such as sergeants for the scriptural chief priests introduces the theme of judicial corruption while locating this biblical scene specifically in late medieval England.⁵⁸ The characterization of Pilate in this play differs from the scriptural descriptions or the ruthless evil tyrant figure in the Towneley *Play of the Talents*.⁵⁹ The biblical accounts present Pilate as a false judge whose indecision leads to the crucifixion of Christ. He is neither informed of the truth of the Resurrection nor does he understand the meaning of Christ's passion. But in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, Pilate's speech indicates his belief in the actuality of Christ's resurrection. Pilate calls Jesus "a man of great vertu" (1253) who had done many wonders while living. Pilate acknowledges the injustice of the Crucifixion, identifying Jesus as a "matyr" crucified by "cawsys ontru" (1255-6). Not only Pilate but also his sergeants believe that Christ has truly risen from the dead, just as he had predicted to the disciples:

PYLATT. ...

And 3e know well how he was to þe erth browth,
Wacchyd wyth knyghts of grett array.

He is resyn again, as before he tawth,
And Joseph of Baramathye he hath takyn away.

[PRIMUS] SERJANTT. Soferyn juge, all þis is soth þat 3e sey,

But all þis mvst be curyd be sotylte,

And sey how hys dysypyllys stollyn hym away –

And þis xall be þe answer, be þe asentt of me! (1257- 64)

⁵⁸ A comparison of English justices to the Jews at the time of Christ's Passion is found in Bishop Brunton of Rochester's sermon in the fourteenth century; see G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, 339.

⁵⁹ For a detailed discussion of Pilate in the Towneley *Play of the Talents*, see Coletti, "Theology and Politics in the Towneley *Play of the Talents*," *Medievalia et Humanistica: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* 9 (1979): 111-26. Unlike Pilate's defensive gesture in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, Pilate in the Towneley *Play of the Talents* plays an active role in silencing the truth of the Resurrection. In the *Play of the Talents*, it is Pilate himself that promises a reward to the soldiers who guarded the tomb if they will keep silent about the Resurrection; in the Bible, the chief priests, not Pilate, bribe the soldiers; see *The Towneley Plays*, A. C. Cawley and Martin Stevens, eds., EETS s.s.71 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 26.544-56.

Pilate and his Sergeants understand that the truth must be suppressed, however, since it may threaten their own lives. Instead of sending a true account, the Sergeants advise Pilate to compose a “pystyll of specyallte” (1267) stating that Christ has died and his disciples have stolen the body.⁶⁰

The Ipswich jurors’ concern about the falsification of written messages parallels the unreliability of legal documents symbolized by Pilate’s “special epistle.”⁶¹ Pilate’s false letter attempts to divorce Christ’s Resurrection from its spiritual meaning by “ascribing it to the purely human agency of Christ’s grave-robbing apostles.”⁶² But for those who cannot comprehend the divine will, the fictional account would sound more plausible; the second Sergeant wholeheartedly supports the first Sergeant’s advice, exclaiming that the story is “most lilly [likely] for to be” (1265). The second Sergeant’s conclusion that the false story will be “most prophytabyll” (1268) for all of them exhibits how truth can be manipulated for the convenience of these corrupt legal representatives. The forged news pleases both Herod and Tiberius; Herod receives the letter “full of blys” (1285) and amply rewards the messenger.

⁶⁰ None of the canonical Gospels mentions Pilate’s “special epistle,” but a reference appears in the Gospel of Nicodemus. In the fourth century, Eusebius mentioned Pilate’s forged report, written to repudiate the Christian faith. It is likely that such reports were written in response to previous Christian claims that Pilate was a witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus; see *The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts*, ed. Ron Cameron (Louisville; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 163.

⁶¹ The abuse of legal documents was a popular subject of late medieval reformists. For instance, scribes and lawyers were criticized for forging self-interested documents: “They maken fals letters and fals seales and makeþ fals dedes and charteres and many opere falsenesses”; see *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. W. Nelson Francis, EETS os 217 (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), 36. See also Emily Steiner’s *Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6. On contemporary accusations against lawyers as liars, see G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, 343-4.

⁶² Scherb, *Staging Faith*, 179.

Tiberius's response to Pilate's letter questions the reliability of written documents and historical record. Paul Strohm notes that although academics of past generations have tried to distinguish the "literary" from the "historical" depending on whether a text relies more on invention or fact, historical narratives, trial records, and official documents all contain "fictive elements" that distort and suppress historical truth.⁶³ As soon as Tiberius receives the letter, he orders his judges to explain its content and then announces his intention to "cronekyl[...] þe zere and þe reynne" of the events it describes, so that they "nevyr xall be forgott, whoso loke þeron" (1329-1330).⁶⁴ Pilate's special epistle, thus chronicled and preserved, exposes the "fictionality" of written history.⁶⁵ Tiberius believes that a mere parchment can preserve the falsified truth. Attempts by Tiberius and Pilate to distort the truth fail, however, since the drama authenticates the event in front of the eyes of audience. Ironically, with this last speech, Tiberius totally disappears from the drama

⁶³ Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 5.

⁶⁴ Tiberius's act of preserving the document is strongly reminiscent of a passage from *Pore Caitif*, which expounds how to receive properly the chartered body of Christ: "This charter may no fyre brenne [burn] ... for this scripture hath the fader of hevne hallowed or maad stedfast, and sente yt into the world, the whiche scripture 'may not be undonn,' as the gospel witnessith. This scripture is our lord Jhesu Crist, charter and bulle of our heritage of heuene. Lokke nat this charter in thy cofre, but sette it or wryte it in thyn hert, and alle the creatures in hevne, nor in erthe, ne in helle mow not robbe it neither brenne it fro the but yf thou wilt thiself, assenting to synne. And yf thou kepe wel this charter in thy cofre of thin hert, with good lyvyng and devoute love lastingly to thyn ende, and trustly and treuly as he is verray God, thorughe vertu of this charter thou shalt have thyn heritage of blysse during withoute ende; see *Pore Caitif*, folios 142^v – 143^r, quoted in Watson, "Conceptions of the Word," 108. Tiberius literally "locks" the charter in the cofre, thereby believing that he can preserve the record forever. Tiberius's act strongly contrasts to that of the three Marys who bear witness to Christ's passion and imprint their experience in the "cofre of [their] thin hert"; see my discussions of the three Marys later in this chapter.

⁶⁵ Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 4. Referring to the Oldhall trial mentioned in the Ipswich jury report as an example, Scase states that some descriptions of bills contained in chronicles could be fabrications, since allegations of bill-casting would have been easy to concoct and hard to disprove; see Scase, "Bill-Casting in Late Medieval England," 228.

and, as Bush points out, puts himself into oblivion with the “false epistles and fatuous chronicles.”⁶⁶

The actions performed on the *loca* – the exchange of letters among the three tyrants, Tiberius’s attempt to suppress the public voice, the pursuit of self-interest, and conspiracies against truth and justice – resonate with contemporary bill-casters’ attacks on manipulated legal proceedings. Discussing the role of “bill-casting” during Jack Cade’s rebellion, Scase maintains that insurgents’ mode of publication had a specific political purpose. Bills placed in public places such as markets, streets, and church doors were offered as substitutes for channels of communication corrupted by the private interests of the king’s counselors.⁶⁷ The “bill-casters” particularly emphasizes how the evil counselors appropriated language for their own profit:

They [the counselors] call us risers and treyturs and the kynges enymys, but we schalle be ffounde his trew lege mene and his best freendus with the help of Jesu, to whom we crye dayly and nyztly, with mony thousand moe, that God of his ryztwysness shall take vengauense on the ffalse treytours of his ryalle realme that have brouzt us in this myschieff and myserie.⁶⁸

The bill charges that the evil counselors’ use of language corrupted channels of communication; such counsels informed the king that evil is good and good is evil; they also led the king to hate the bill-casters by calling them traitors and enemies when the

⁶⁶ Bush, “The Resources of *Locus* and *Platea* Staging,” 165.

⁶⁷ Scase, “Bill-Casting in Late Medieval England,” 235. One of the bills circulated by Jack Cade’s supporters in 1450 accuses counselors of accepting a bribe to speed or delay the passage of petitions to the king. Another bill complains that the chancellor Lord Say censored sermons and thereby prevented people from learning the truth.

⁶⁸ I. M. W. Harvey, *Jack Cade’s Rebellion of 1450* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 149-50, quoted in Scase, “Bill-Casting in Late Medieval England,” 234.

counselors themselves are true traitors. As Scase observes, words such as “trew” and “ffalse,” “freendus” and “enmys,” and “lege mene” and “treytours” became “floating signifiers” used by both bill-casters and counselors in order to attack each other.⁶⁹ The bill-casters’ statement exhibits an understanding that language, without any fixed meaning, is susceptible to willful manipulations.

In *Mary Magdalene*, the tyrants’ placement on the *loca*, closed and private spaces that stand in opposition to the public arena of the *platea*, carries symbolic meaning that is fully compatible with social and political discourses of late medieval England. The *loca* represents a secret place in which the distortion of truth occurs. It is also a space where language circulates with private meaning. Tiberius appropriates the meaning of the word “traitor” in order to accuse Christ’s apostles disobedient to his rule. But the emperor’s attempt fails since from the perspective of the audience and reader, Tiberius himself appears as the “traitor” who defamed and murdered the “son of þe Godhed” (1321) and “the kyng of the Jews” (1318).

The abuse of language critiqued in late medieval political discourse serves as a central theme in the dramatic representation of Mary Magdalene’s lapse into sin. The perverted language in which Lady Lechery salutes Mary supports this point. Lechery calls Mary a “lady most lavdabyll of alyauvns” (440) whose “benyng afyavuns” (442) gives comfort to many people. The salutation – “heyl” (441) – that identifies her with the Virgin Mary satisfies Mary Magdalene who, piqued by her pride, leads herself into sin. Mary’s response to Lady Lechery’s promise of servitude also exemplifies the slipperiness of language: “Your debonarius obedyauuns ravyssyt me to trankquelyte!” (447). On the

⁶⁹ Scase, “Bill-Casting in Late Medieval England,” 235.

one hand, Mary Magdalene's speech conveys obvious sexual implications that epitomize the inner state of the prostitute Mary Magdalene.⁷⁰ On the other hand, the references to the state of "tranquility" and the "ravishment" carry tremendous spiritual connotations associated with the language of medieval mystics.⁷¹

The dalliance between Mary and Curiosity in the tavern and Mary Magdalene's soliloquy in the arbor present her fallen state in terms of linguistic abuse. The scenes of both the tavern and the bower show how language blurs the boundary between the profane and sacred. In the tavern Curiosity calls Mary "my herty's hele" (521) and "swete lelly" (526); she is "most of femynyte" (515), whose "sofreyn colourrys [are] set wyth synseryte" (517). Later Jesus uses similar epithets to praise the Virgin Mary: "My blyssyd mother, of demvre femynyte / ... She is þe precyus pyn, full of ensens, / The precyus synamvyr, þe body thorow to seche. / She is þe mvske azens þe hertys of vyolens, / þe jentyll jelopher azens þ cardyakyllys wrech (1356-1363). The tavern scene features a problematic assimilation of courtly to devotional language. Particularly, the final conversation between Curiosity and Mary foreshadows the last scene of the play in which Mary receives the sacrament and exclaims "*In manus tuas, Domine*" before she progresses into "another stede" (542), heaven:

CURYOSTE. Now, derlyng dere, wol yow do be my rede?
We haue dronkyn and ete lytyl brede –
Wyll we walk to anther stede?
MARY. Ewyn at your wyl, my dere derlyng!
Thowe 3e wyl go to þe wordys eynd,

⁷⁰ Boehnen, "The Aesthetics of 'Sprawling' Drama," 335.

⁷¹ Boehnen finds the blurring of the secular and sacred in the messengers' salutations, which exemplify the appropriation of spiritual language by secular rulers; see Boehnen, "The Aesthetics of 'Sprawling' Drama," 333.

I wol neuyr from yow wynd,
To dye for your sake! (540-6)

Curiosity's references to drinking and eating are reminiscent of the Eucharist, and Mary's promise to follow her "dere derlyng" (543) anticipates her pledge of loyalty to Christ in the last scene. Describing the tavern as the emblem of unstable worldly power and sensuous delight, Scherb underscores its negative associations.⁷² Just as the tavern scene intermingles the secular with the spiritual, the fallen Mary's speech in the garden crosses the boundary with a subtle religious connotation. The situation of Mary yearning for her absent lovers in the bower strikingly resembles that of the female speaker in the Song of Solomon:⁷³

MARI. A, God be wyth my valentynys,
My byrd swetyng, my lovys so dere!
For þey be bote for a blossom of blysse!
Me mervellyt sore þey be nat here,
But I woll restyn in þis erbyre,
Amons thes bamys precyus of prysse,
Tyll som lovyr wol apere
That me is wont to hailes and kysse. (564-71)

Mary's references to "My byrd swetyng" (565), "blossom of blysse" (566), and "bamys precyus of prysse" (569) are all charged with religious meanings. The identification between the fluidity of language and Mary's fallen state in the scenes of the tavern and the bower casts doubt upon the legitimacy and efficacy of human language in the communication of sacred knowledge.

⁷² Scherb, *Staging Faith*, 117.

⁷³ For discussions of allegorical language in these two scenes, see Scherb, *Staging Faith*, 116-7; and Coletti, "'Curtesy Doth It Yow Lere': The Sociology of Transgression in the Digby Mary Magdalene," *ELH* 71 (2004): 6-14.

In the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, an awareness of the limitations and slipperiness of human language explains why concrete visual images appear as an effective medium for religious communication. The stage direction indicating the entrance of the three Marys right before their witness to the resurrection of Christ shows the audience how to remember the mystery of God in a proper way:

Here xall entyr þe thre Marris arayyd as chast women,
wyth sygnis of þe passyon pryntyd ypon þer brest. (s.d. 993)

Scholars have offered various interpretations of this stage direction. Focusing on the word “arrayyd as chast women,” Coletti investigates late medieval ideas of feminine holiness. The image of the Marys clothed as chaste women participates in late medieval hagiography’s effort to “resignify the vitae of biblical and legendary saints to suit the values and desires of new, devout publics.”⁷⁴ Bush finds in this stage direction a “personal and intimate testimony to faith in the “sygnis of þe passion.”⁷⁵ Boehnen also shows interest in the “sygnis of þe passion,” and suggests that they refer to the badges recommended to late medieval pilgrims returned from Jerusalem.⁷⁶ All these interpretations attest to the symbolic function of a stage image that represents the process of enhancing religious faith. The “sygnis of þe passion, pryntyd ypon þer brest,” point to a significant relationship between experience, knowledge, and faith. As the witness to the three Marys’ spiritual experience, the signs of Christ’s passion printed “ypon þer brest”

⁷⁴ Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints*, 53.

⁷⁵ Bush, “Resources of *Locus* and *Platea* Staging,” 145.

⁷⁶ Boehnen, “The Aesthetics of ‘Sprawling’ Drama,” 341.

symbolize the “process of conceiving the Word.”⁷⁷ In other words, the three Marys have contained the image of Christ in their hearts and made intimate union with the Godhead. The bodily experience, remembered as a concrete image and imprinted on the heart, compares to Pilate’s special epistle that misrepresents the truth. Locked up in Tiberius’s archive, the letter symbolizes documentary falsehood.

“Bodyly, Wyth Here Carnall Yye”

Other late medieval East Anglian texts similarly emphasize the importance of visual and corporeal experience in attaining spiritual knowledge and thereby inspiring faith in God. For instance, Julian of Norwich, the late fourteenth-century anchoress and visionary, opens *Revelation of Love* with a declaration of her desire for the gifts of God: “the first was mende of His passion. The second was bodily sekenesse in youth at thirty yeeres of age. The third was to have of Gods gift three wounds.” While all three wishes express Julian’s fervent desire for corporeal and visual evidence of divine love, her first wish, specifically, strongly resonates with the Digby *Mary Magdalene* and the importance of “experiential knowledge”:⁷⁸

Methought I would have beene that time with Mary Magdalen and with
other that were Crists lovers, and therefore I desired a bodily sight wherein
I might have more knowledge of the bodily peynes of our Saviour, and of
the compassion of our Lady and of all His trew lovers that seene that time

⁷⁷ Watson, “Conceptions of the Word,” 110.

⁷⁸ Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints*, 78.

His peynes, for I would be one of them and suffer with Him. . . . The cause of this petition was that after the sheweing I should have the more trew minde in the passion of Christe.⁷⁹

Julian's desire for the "bodily sight" of the suffering Christ is primarily grounded in her understanding of direct physical experience as a source of spiritual authority. She believes that participating in the scene of Christ's passion and experiencing the same emotional sufferings of the beholders would give her "more trew minde in the passion of Christe."

Julian's belief that visual experience would encourage her faith in God is compatible with the devotional function that *Mary Magdalene* aims to perform with its appeal to the visual and corporeal. In *Mary Magdalene* the spectacular stage images that culminate in Jesus' bodily purgation of a sinful woman serve to re-enact biblical events and persons, offering to the audience a chance to participate in the sacred moments created by theatrical illusion and to be emotionally stirred. The affective nature of East Anglian religious culture reverberates in Lydgate's *Testament*, where the poet presents detailed, gruesome images of a suffering Christ in order to rouse the compassion of readers. In the voice of Jesus, Lydgate repeatedly exhorts his readers to "behold" and remember: "Emprente thes thynges in thyn inward thought, / And grue hem depe in thy remembraunce, / Thynke on hem 'wel', and forgete hem nowght" (874-6).⁸⁰ The poet

⁷⁹ Julian of Norwich, *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Georgia Ronan Crampton, TEAMS (Kalamzoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 1994), 39.

⁸⁰ *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, vol. 1, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, EETS, e.s. 107 (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 361. One of the definitions of the Middle English word "imprint" is to "remember"; see *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *emprenten*. The relationship between the two words suggests a medieval idea of remembering—i.e. imprinting a concrete image in one's heart.

desires to excite the readers' imagination with his visual images in order that they can make the "word flesh" and "print" the concrete and visual images "ypon þer brest."⁸¹

Mary's preaching on the creation of the world to the king of Marcyll demonstrates the significance of carnal experience for an understanding of divine knowledge. Her language no longer consists of "floating signifiers"; it is transparent without any intermingling of the profane and sacred. Scherb argues that her preaching does not "outline her personal experience of Christ's ministry in any significant way"; rather than witnessing to her bodily experience of divine love, Mary's sermon draws the audience's attention to "divinely inspired truth authenticated in Scripture."⁸² Indeed, enumerating how "holy wrytt berytt wettnesse" (1500) and "skryptur declarytt pleyn"(1521), Mary relies on scriptural authority in order to endorse her spiritual knowledge. But Mary's belief in the scriptural account occurs only after her personal and bodily experience of divine ministry:

[MARIA.] O þou, gloryus Lord, þis reheryd for my sped,
Sowle helth attys tyme for to recure.
Lord, for þat I was in whanhope, now stond I in dred,
But þat þi gret mercy wyth me may endure.
My thowth þou knewyst wythowttyn ony dowth.
Now may I trost þe techeyng of Isaye in scryptur,
Wos report of þi nobyllnesse rennyt fere abowt! (692-8)

Mary's testimonial after her bodily purgation of seven devils depreciates the authority of Isaiah by placing her own experience over the written accounts of this prophet.⁸³ The

⁸¹ Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion*, 87.

⁸² Scherb, "Worldly and Sacred Messengers," 7.

⁸³ See Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints*, 212. Coletti states that the drama by nature privileges the material over spiritual. The "inescapable materiality" makes drama an ideal medium for exploiting "the central tensions activated by Mary Magdalene's witness to the Resurrection."

word “now” asserts that Mary’s trust in the words of the Bible as well as her authority as a preacher stem from her personal and direct experience of Christ. She believes in the sayings of Isaiah since, unlike Pilate’s forged letter, the scriptural narratives could be verified and “re-enacted.”⁸⁴ Mary’s direct experience of Jesus’ mercy, his passion and resurrection, enable her to believe even divine mysteries she has never witnessed or experienced. Her sermon to the king of Marcyll shows that she has now attained a higher level of spirituality that does not require visual testimony.⁸⁵ Mary’s “pleyn” (1525) language demonstrates her authority and learning; she quotes the Bible directly to demonstrate her command of the scriptural “sentens” (1452): “Syr, I wyll declare al and sum, / What from God fryst ded procede. / He seyde, ‘*In principio erat verbum*’, / And wyth þat he provyd hys grett Godhed!” (1481-1484). After hearing her sermon, the king of Marcyll exclaims, “herke, woman, thow hast many resonnyngs grett!” (1526). The king’s comment testifies to Mary’s intellectual understanding of the divine “lawys” (1452).

Christ also communicates the idea that sacred knowledge can be attained not by learning but by experience. Throughout the play, Jesus expounds to Mary and his disciples the need for visual experience that may enable them to have true faith in his miracles. Informed of the death of Lazarus, Jesus tells his disciples that “Tyme ys comyn of very cognysyon” (846). Jesus then states that the raising of Lazarus will attest to the truth of his own resurrection: “I, therfor, hastely follow me now, / For Lazar is ded, verily to preve; / Whe[r]for I am joyfull, I sey onto yow, / That I knowlege yow therwyth, that

⁸⁴ Twycross, “Beyond the Picture Theory,” 592. Twycross states that “narrative re-enactments” are the staple of the mystery plays.

⁸⁵ After the purgation of seven devils, Jesus says that “Blyssyd be þey at alle tyme / That sen me nat, and have me in credens.” To believe in Christ without a bodily experience is the stage Mary Magdalene achieves at the scene of her preaching to the king of Marcyll.

ye may it beleve” (865-8). This account of the divine will implicated in his incarnation, passion, and resurrection shows the inseparable link between visual experience, faith, and “very cognyssyon.” After his own resurrection, Jesus appears physically in front of the three Marys. Jesus then sends them off to the other apostles to come to Galilee so that they can see him, “Bodyly, wyth here carnall yye” (1124). Jesus’s speech sums up the importance of bodily experience in attaining true knowledge.

“Know Þis Be Posybyl[yt]e”: Conclusion

Doubts about written messages in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* mirror problems of communication in a contemporary politics in which written texts, tainted by factional perspectives and self-interest, scarcely offer any truth. The anti-textual tendency of the play is also linked to the affective, visual emphases of East Anglian religious culture. A dead letter inscribed on a piece of parchment, Pilate’s special epistle scarcely communicates truth. The letter ditorts the “tydyngys of Crystys passion” (1283) and preserves the fake story as historical record. The perception that script and human language can be misleading and carry negative connotations accounts for the power of visual images in medieval religious communication; the bodily experience of witnessing miracles reenacted on stage through visual images and spectacle plays a more effective role in communicating sacred knowledge and stimulating faith. Contrasted to letters

written on parchment, the “words inscribed spiritually on the minds of men” retain strength in the messages of the drama and art of this region.⁸⁶

The Digby *Mary Magdalene* exhibits a strong investment in the idea of incarnation. The drama asserts that theater makes it possible to transform “word” into “flesh” and the “sentens” into “syth.”⁸⁷ After her personal experience of Christ’s resurrection, Magdalene proclaims the event a “joyfull tydyng” to all people that “after us xall reynge,” who will realize that the resurrection is not a mere fable: “Thys knowledge of þi deyyte,/ To all pepull þat xall [it] obteyne, / And know þis be posybyl[yt]e ” (1089-91). Mary’s use of the word “posybyl[yt]e” echoes Christ’s use of the same word when he answers his disciples’ question whether he will raise Lazarus from his death; “That is trew, and be possybilyte; / Therfor, of my deth, shew yow I wyll” (855-6). Christ also asks the disciples to accompany him to “fulfill posybyll peticion” (848) by Martha and Mary to give aid to Lazarus. Defined as a state “capable of existing and occurring,” the Middle English word “possible” carries a strong sense of material presence and realization, Christ’s repetitive “That is possybilyte” urges the audience to believe that not only the miracle of raising Lazarus but also his resurrection are true and can actually be realized in front of their eyes.⁸⁸

Walter Ong asserts that an oral culture has the advantage of achieving “close, emphatic, and communal identification” between communicators, while writing

⁸⁶ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 210.

⁸⁷ At the end of the play, the priest-hermit address the audience: “Sufferens of þis processe, thus enddyt þe sentens / That we have playyd in yower syth” (2131-2). The expression compares to Poeta’s speech in the *Conversion of St. Paul*, where he announces that the play is based on the Bible; see the following discussion on Poeta’s speech in p. 176.

⁸⁸ For definitions of the medieval word “possible,” see *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *possible*.

“separates” the reader from the writer and thus strengthens a sense of personal disengagement:

When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker. If the speaker asks the audience to read a handout provided for them, as each reader enters into his or her own private reading world, the unity of the audience is shattered, to be re-established only when oral speech begins again. Writing and print isolate. There is no collective noun or concept for readers corresponding to audience. The interiorizing force of the oral word relates in a special way to the sacred, to the ultimate concerns of existence.⁸⁹

This passage expounds that writing cannot achieve the sense of unity and interconnectedness evoked by orally communicated words. Ong also emphasizes that the oral word “never exists in a simply verbal context, as a written word does.” Spoken words are “modifications of a total existential situation” and always engage the body.⁹⁰

Ong’s observation of the link between speech, bodily presence, and the sacred is crucial for understanding the religious function of the drama in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*. By reenacting the scene of Resurrection to which Mary Magdalene bears witness, the drama invites the audience to participate in the same scene and understand the truth of biblical events. Spectacular images in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* aimed to engage the feeling of participation and a sense of unity among the viewers, which the written messages of the temporal rulers also seek but fail to achieve. Jesus’ speech after the Resurrection addresses not only the three Marys but implicates also the audience and entire humanity:

⁸⁹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 74.

⁹⁰ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 67.

JHESUS. I woll shew to synnars as I do to thee,
Yf they woll with veruens of love me seke.
Be stedfast, and I shall evyr wyth thee be,
And wyth all tho that to me byn meke! (1092-95)

Jesus promises to “shew” himself physically to whomever asks for him, just as he appeared to Mary Magdalene. As if to verify his promise, as soon as Mary Jacob expresses her wish to see Jesus with her own eye, he appears again, saying “To shew desyrows hartys I am full nere, / Women, I apere to yow and sey, ‘Awete!’” (1110-11). The second appearance of the resurrected Jesus exhibits the magical power of the theater that makes the miracle possible. Asserting that medieval cults of saints are crucial for understanding contemporary drama, Davidson states that medieval saint plays were designed to bring into view a representation of a saint now residing with God and thus available to be invoked by the worshippers.⁹¹ More effectively than writing, medieval drama invites the audience to participate physically in the biblical events performing in front of their eyes and to find themselves emotionally implicated. In the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, the Scriptural “information” (171) prophesying the coming of Jesus (“That child xal remain of grete renovn / And all the word of hem shold magnify” [173-174]) fails to communicate the correct message to Herod and the philosophers. Moreover, the Latin passage (“Et ambulabunt gentes in lumine [tuo], et reges / In splendore ortus tui [175-6]) would have been too abstract for the medieval audience to understand its message. By participating in the theatrically reproduced scene of Jesus’s passion and resurrection with Mary Magdalene, the audience receives the biblical message.

⁹¹ Davidson, “The Middle English Saint Play,” 52.

Writing and visual images, however, do not stand in absolute opposite to each other.⁹² Mary Magdalene's reference to trusting "þe techeyng of Isaye in scryptur, / Wos report of þi nobyllnesse rennyt fere abowt!"(697-8) elucidates how written authority and physical experience may complement each other in the attainment of sacred knowledge. Although those who can believe without carnal experience exhibit a higher level of spirituality, visual images and spectacle are indispensable for the enhanced religious experience of "those who cannot love otherwise than carnally."⁹³ Corporeality and "experiential knowledge" have a particular weight in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* because of the saint's status in late medieval religious cult as the witness of God's incarnation. The dramatist's effort to create theatrical and visual illusion in *Mary Magdalene* becomes clear when we compare this play with the *Conversion of St. Paul*, another East Anglian play included in the same Digby manuscript. While *Mary Magdalene* contains scarcely any comment that exposes its theatrical illusion, the *Conversion of St. Paul* has the Poeta figure appear on stage to emphasize that the play is based on biblical texts:

POETA: Honorable frendys, besechyng yow of lycens
 To procede owur processe, we may [show] under your correccyon,
 The conversion of Seynt Paule, as the Byble gyf experyens.
 Whoo lyst to rede the booke *Actum Appostolorum*,
 —Ther shall he have the very notycyon. (8-12)⁹⁴

⁹² Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints*, 124.

⁹³ St. Bernard's *Cantica* 20:6 quoted in Gibson's *The Theater of Devotion*, 14. Drawing on St. Bernard, Nicholas Love also advocated the use of concrete images for the education of the laity: "To the whiche symple soules, as seynt Bernerde seye, contemplacion of the monhede of Cryste is more likyng, more spedefull and more sykere than is hyghe contemplacion of the Godhed. Ande therefore to hem is principally to be sette in mynde the ymage of Crystes incarnation, passion and resurreccion, so that a symple soule that kan not thence bot bodyes or bodily thinges mowe have somewhat accordyng unto is [his] affeccion, wherewith he maye fede and stire his decision"; see Watson, "Conceptions of the Word," 94.

⁹⁴ See also Poeta's speech in lines 158-161, "To understand this mater, w[h]o lyst to rede / The Holy Bybyll for the better spede, / Ther shall he have the perfyth intellygens, / And thus we comyt yow to Crystys magnyfycens." Poeta again quotes the Bible at the conclusion of the play in order to explain how St. Paul escapes from the city of Damascus. In the Bible, St. Paul gets arrested and imprisoned by Anna and

Spectacular elements in this play, such as the sensational entrance of Belial and Mercury or the fall of St. Paul from his horse by the tempest from God, are as important as in *Mary Magdalene*.⁹⁵ But in reconstructing the life of St. Paul, whose emblems are the book of the Gospel and the sword, the playwright exploits the connection to textuality implicated in traditional representations of the saint.⁹⁶ The apostle's proclamation at the end of his sermon that the "Ieye ys euer the messenger of foly" (57) even implicitly denies the authority of visual experience that figures most prominently in *Mary Magdalene*. A direct link between *Mary Magdalene* and the biblical text is scarcely articulated except at the end, however, in which the priest-hermit concludes that "thus enddyt þe *sentens* / That we have playyd in yower syth" (2131-2).⁹⁷ The comparison between *The Conversion of St. Paul* and *Mary Magdalens* shows how each saint's different status in late medieval religious culture determines the ways that each text responds to the problem of writing and communication as well as to representations of an "incarnational aesthetic" and "affective piety." Mary stood nearby when Christ was crucified and was the first to see his resurrection. The dramatic representation of Mary Magdalene exploits her significance as the first-hand witness to Christ's godhead. The

Caypha; but with the help of the other disciples, he succeeds in escaping from Damascus in a basket and joins them in Jerusalem: "But the dyscyplys in the nygt over the wall truly, / As the Bybull sayeth: *dim [I]serunt eum summit[en]t es in sporta*" (651-2).

⁹⁵ Donald C. Baker and John L. Murphy speculate that the scene of Belial and Mercury could have been an insertion by a later hand. Furnivall has claimed that both *Mary Magdalene* and the Belial episode were written by the same scribe, but Baker dismisses the claim, pointing to the difference of scribal hands; see the Introduction in the EETS edition of the Digby plays, p. xxix-xxxi. Baker and Murphy's observation of the Belial episode suggests that the scene, probably added for a comic effect, was not included in the dramatist's original plan to delineate the image of St. Paul.

⁹⁶ Davidson notes that St. Paul's story is more closely connected to the Bible than any other saint play in the Digby manuscript; see "The Middle English Saint Play," 98.

⁹⁷ Italics are mine.

symbolic image of the saint as well as social skepticism about writing and written documents in contemporary society significantly influenced the negative representations of writing in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*.

EPILOGUE: “Lak of Stedfastnesse”

Thanks to you [Thoth] and your invention, your pupils will be widely read
without benefit of a teacher’s instruction.”

-- Plato, *Phaedrus*--

Generally read as a poem about “the world upside-down,” Chaucer’s “Lak of Stedfastnesse” begins with the poet’s contemplation on linguistic instability:

Somtyme the world was so stedfast and stable
That mannes word was obligacioun,
And now it is so fals and deceivable
That word and deed, as in conclusioun,
Ben nothing lyk, for turned up-so-doun
Is al this world for mede and wilfulnesse,
That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse.¹

This poem conveys a message that the present world’s instability stems mainly from linguistic abuse. Remembering the virtues of the past when “mannes word” was a “bond,” the poet laments that the world has become “up-so-doun” since a man’s “word and deed ... / Ben nothing lyk” (4-5). All is lost for “lak of stedfastnesse” (7).

Scholars have considered this poem, presumably written in 1380s, either as composed entirely out of historical context or as a “highly topical utterance,” deeply connected to contemporary political issues.² The poem begins with famous lines from Boethius that the “bond of love ... holds together in stability the contrarious elements of

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, “Lak of Stedfastnesse,” in *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson et al., 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), lines 1-7.

² For an analysis of the responses to this poem, see Paul Strohm, “The Textual Environment of Chaucer’s ‘Lak of Stedfastnesse,’” *Hochon’s Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 65-66.

the world.”³ It also echoes the mood and sentiment of Old French and Latin poems concerned with traditional themes such as “evils of the time” and “abuse of the age.”⁴ But unlike Boethius or Old French and Latin poets, Chaucer portrays the vices of the present in terms of linguistic corruption. The poet replaces the Boethian expression “bond of love” with the bond (“obligation” [2]) of “mannes word” (2). Whereas a thirteenth-century Latin poem laments the loss of “true love,” Chaucer writes that “Trouthe is put doun, resoun is holden fable” (15).⁵ The present world is upside down since the desire for “mede” (6) and selfishness has corrupted men’s “word”(4). The poem demonstrates how Chaucer considers linguistic abuse as the cause of all forms of social malais. Chaucer states that “lak of stedfastness” brings social “dissensioun” (9) and “willful wrecchednesse” (13). The world has gone from “right to wrong, fro trouthe to fikelnesse” (20).

The scholars who find in this poem allusions to contemporary political events maintain that the poem is concerned with the struggle between Richard II and the Lord Appellants during the Wonderful Parliament of 1386. Observing Chaucer’s envoy to Richard II, both Paul Strohm and V. J. Scattergood read this poem as Chaucer’s encouragement of the king, who was stripped of his royal authority and oppressed under the Lord Appellants.⁶ Particularly, Scattergood claims that line 26 – “Shew forth thy swerd of castigacioun” – urges the king to take vengeance for his humiliation, pointing out that in late medieval England traitors of high rank were sometimes beheaded with the

³ A. J. Minnis, V. J. Scattergood, and J. J. Smith, *The Shorter Poems: Oxford Guide to Chaucer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 489.

⁴ Minnis, Scattergood, and Smith, *The Shorter Poems*, 490.

⁵ For the quotation from the Latin poem, see Minnis, Scattergood, and Smith, *The Shorter Poems*, 490.

⁶ Minnis, Scattergood, and Smith, *The Shorter Poems*, 491.

sword rather than the axe.⁷

Since Chaucer's works never directly address social or political issues, it is impossible to know whether the poem is related to any contemporary event. When we locate this poem in the same social and textual context as *The Man of Law's Tale* and *The Manciple's Tale*, the poem's concerns about linguistic instability make better sense. According to Paul Strohm, the Middle English word "extorcioun" (23) refers specifically to the confiscation of "money ... by force, intimidation, or the undue exercise of power or authority."⁸ The envoy in which Chaucer counsels the king to follow "law"(27) and "hate extorcioun" (23) reminds us of the statement from the 1399 articles of deposition that Richard manipulated documents in order to obtain "great sums of money from both the clergy and the people of [seventeen counties of the realm], which they granted to him in order to secure his favor."⁹ Whichever political events Chaucer had in mind when writing the poem, it clearly illustrates how important the issue of contemporary linguistic manipulation is for the poet. This poem reverberates with the anxiety expressed in *The Man of Law's Tale* and *The Manciple's Tale* that human words hardly communicate truth.

I began this project with an assumption that in the Middle Ages people welcomed the advancement of documentary culture and explored the potential of "practical literacy" for their own profit. But the late medieval English texts I discuss in my dissertation show diverse responses to the use of literacy and documents. The Pastons, on the one hand,

⁷ Minnis, Scattergood, and Smith, *The Shorter Poems*, 490.

⁸ Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 68.

⁹ *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, ed. J. Strachey et al., 6 vols (London: 1783), vol. 3, 415-53. I rely on Given-Wilson for the translation of the articles; see *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 172-84. See also my discussion of the articles of deposition in Chapter 2.

readily adopted the “technology” of writing and exploited its potential for the family’s social advancement.¹⁰ The letter offered the Pastons a convenient medium of social communication through which they could keep informed of the outside world. The Paston’s passion for letter-writing evidences an investment in late medieval documentary culture and a “literate mentality.” On the other hand, *The Man of Law’s Tale* and the Digby *Mary Magdalene* question the spread of literacy and writing, critiquing efficacy of the written document as a reliable form of human communication. In Chaucer’s texts, the contemporary social practice of documentary abuse offered the poet an occasion to explore the intrinsic instability of human language; in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* documentary culture is mobilized to explore a theatrical potential for religious communication.

M. T. Clanchy argues that trust in writing did not occur automatically; medieval people had to develop that trust.¹¹ The deep ambivalence toward writing, however, has continued from the time of Plato to the modern era. Particularly, in Age of Information in which mastering the computer technology has become an emblem of the intellectual and of news spread instantly, this medieval ambivalence has a special resonance. We still find that all sorts of falsehood circulate, intermingled with truth; documents are forged, and written words cause anxiety. The 17 March 2006 *Washington Post* cites an email posting, originally set up in an Internet chat room on 28 February 2005. Criticizing Supreme Court justice Ginsburg’s and O’Connor’s citation of foreign law in the rulings supporting abortion rights and gay rights, the message calls for certain “commandoes” to execute the

¹⁰ For an idea of writing as a “technology,” see M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 88-115.

¹¹ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*, 2.

two justices. Commenting that their use of foreign laws is a “huge threat to [the] Republic and Constitutional freedom,” the message warns that the two justices will not “live another week.”¹² The email message is highly reminiscent of a bill written right before Sir William Oldhall’s rebellion:¹³

But Suthfolke, Salesbuery and Say
Be don to deathe by May
England may synge well away.¹⁴

The bill was posted at the gates of St. Paul’s Church in 1450 when the rumor circulated that Henry VI, falsely counseled by the duke of Suffolk, the bishops of Salisbury and Chichester, and Lord Say, had sold England and the king of France would soon rule the realm. Although the technology has changed, both messages exhibit a similar desire for influencing public opinion by conveying information and communicating dissident voices. Despite a gap of five centuries, the anxiety evoked by these two written messages has not much changed.

¹² Charles Lane, “Ginsberg Faults GOP Critics, Cites a Threat from ‘Fringe,’” *The Washington Post* 17 March, 2006, A3.

¹³ For the rebellion of Sir William Oldhall and his accomplices, see my discussion at Chapter 3.

¹⁴ C. L. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1963), 370. For a discussion of this bill, see Wendy Scase, “‘Strange and Wonderful Bills’: Bill-Casting and Political Discourse in late Medieval England,” *New Medieval Literatures II*, Rita Copeland, Davis Lawton, and Wendy Scase, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 235.

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