

**ENGLISH VERNACULAR LETTERS. c. 1400 – c. 1600:
LANGUAGE, LITERACY AND CULTURE**

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ABSTRACT

The thesis argues for a fuller, and in some ways more rigorous, use of early English vernacular letters as a source for the writing of history. The opening section presents a review of the evidence for letter-writing practices in the period; this is an area which is currently poorly understood, and which forms a prerequisite for scholarly study of letters. The remainder of the thesis consists of two case studies, both of which illustrate the ways in which close linguistic analysis, and a holistic view of letters as material artefacts as well as texts, might illuminate our understanding of the past. The first study explores the use of epistolary texts in the civic arena. It suggests that letters and petitions, texts which are usually considered pragmatic, offer insights into the negotiation of identities in late medieval cities. It demonstrates that cities orientated themselves in different ways to wider forms of authority in later medieval society. It also displays the way in which these identities changed in the social flux of the later medieval period.

The second case study concentrates on a question more conventionally explored through correspondence; it asks whether changes in the ideology of the family between c.1400 and c.1600 can be identified in epistolary evidence. The shifts identified in the material aspects of letters, their rhetoric and style, are then considered in the context of changing epistolary theory and literary practice. The study demonstrates that the sixteenth century did indeed see significant reorganisation in the area of close kin relations. Further, it shows that these changes are social shifts, which cannot be attributed to changes in letter-writing theory.

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NOTE ON SPELLING AND TRANSLATIONS

Throughout the thesis it has been my endeavour to quote either from original documents, or from editions which preserve the original spelling of the texts. Documents from the Lisle letters, which are available in modernised spelling, have been retranscribed from the originals in the PRO. The correspondence of the Thynne family and some of the letters in the Cottonian manuscripts have been treated in a similar fashion. Unfortunately, it has not proved possible to examine the primary source in every case, and it has therefore been necessary to quote some texts in modernised spelling. Quotations taken from M.A.E. Wood, *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies of Great Britain* are modernised. So too are those from J.O. Halliwell, *Letters of the Kings of England*, and from Barbara Winchester, *A Tudor Portrait*. The modern status of these texts has not been noted.

Where possible texts, both primary and secondary, have been given in the original language. For reasons of economy, quotations in Anglo-Norman have not been translated; a certain level of expertise is assumed in the reader. Extended quotations from the Latin have been given translations. Where quotations are above a certain length the English has been placed in the text rather than the Latin. In a small number of cases only the English has been quoted; these are taken from secondary sources which were only consulted in translation.

INTRODUCTION

[They] are the most curious papers of the sort I ever saw & the oldest original letters I believe extant in this Country. The historic picture they give of the reign of Henry 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

So wrote Horace Walpole to his friend, the antiquarian John Fenn in 1784. Three years after receiving this letter, Fenn did indeed lay a selection of these letters before the public. In the preface to the first edition of what have since come to be called 'the Paston Letters' he expressed his own opinion concerning the value of the collection:

The principal satisfaction of the reader will arise from two sources. He will hear the events of the moment from persons living at the time; and will see the manners and usages of that age, painted in the most familiar language, undisguised and unadorned ...²

Much has changed in the two centuries since the publication of the Paston Letters. Since that time History has become a professional academic discipline. New bodies of material have been discovered, and many new interpretative techniques devised. Yet despite this, historians' views of ordinary vernacular letters have remained surprisingly consistent. The purpose of the present thesis is to challenge some of these 'orthodox' opinions, and to outline some new approaches to letters. In the following discussion I will outline the methodological framework of the present thesis by demonstrating some of the problems and omissions in past scholarship, and contrasting these with more recent developments in the historiography of the disciplines of History and English. This survey will be followed by a brief outline of the thesis, and by more specific discussion of the sources which will be considered in this study.

¹*PL*:I, p. xxiv.

²Quoted in Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters* (Oxford, 1958), p. xxvi.

Historiography and Methodology

The importance of letters as a historical source has been acknowledged over the past century and a half by many different scholars, engaged in historical projects of many different kinds. In 1860 F.C. Hingeston, editor of one of the many collections of royal letters which were to appear in the recently-established Rolls Series, explained the value of the documents thus:

Letters are the key to History; they unlock difficulties, detect false interpretations, and expose erroneous deductions... If it were possible to discover a full and unbroken chronological series of them, most of the obstacles which the Historian now finds in his way would be removed.³

Some fifty years later a scholar dedicated to a rather different kind of history evinced a similar enthusiasm. In an unpublished lecture, the first of a series devoted to letters as a source for social history, Eileen Power stated:

It will be admitted without difficulty, I think, that the most valuable documents for the history of the Middle Ages are letters, missive letters, both official and private correspondences.⁴

Similar comments are also readily found in more recent works. In his survey of the English family, Ralph Houlbrooke places letters in his first category of source material, that which gives the best, most direct access to family life in the past.⁵ In 1999 Susan Whyman wrote with enthusiasm about the Verney letters:

The letters reveal generational continuities, along with changing values and hidden passions that are lost in quantitative records. Because the documents are organised around the family head, one gets multi-dimensional views of topics. The reader gradually grasps the rhythms of daily life. Attitudes to politics,

³F. C. Hingeston, ed., *Royal and Historical Letters During the Reign of Henry IV*, 2 vols. Rolls Series 18 (1860-65):I, p. x.

⁴Eileen Power, *Medieval People* (London, 1924), p. 116.

⁵Ralph Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1450-1700* (Harlow and New York, 1984), p. 2.

children, illness, fate and death reveal the evolution of ideas and behaviour.⁶

Despite this consensus concerning the importance of correspondence, it is nevertheless my belief, and the contention of this thesis, that correspondence has, hitherto, been under-exploited by historians studying the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This neglect, or perhaps even misuse, takes two main forms. The first concerns theme, or the range of topics which have been explored through the close reading of letters. The second concerns methodology, or the particular approaches and techniques which have been used to interpret correspondence.

Correspondence and Political History

Though its causes are complex, my argument concerning the thematic under-use of letters is comparatively simple to describe. From the time when the subject first became accepted as a legitimate area of enquiry, letters have formed one of the most important categories of source material for social history. Eileen Power used letters to explore the wool trade in the fifteenth century.⁷ The gentry correspondence continues to represent one of the most used sources in discussions of medieval marriage making, while longer surveys of family formation have drawn extensively on later collections, such as those of the Lises and the Verneys.⁸ Where political history is concerned, however, the situation is very different.

⁶ Susan Whyman, "Paper visits": the post-Restoration letter as seen through the Verney family archive', in R. Earle, ed., *Epistolary Selves: letters and letter-writers* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 15-36, at p. 17.

⁷ See note 4 above.

⁸ C. Richmond, 'The Pastons Revisited: Marriage and the Family in Fifteenth-Century England', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 58 (1985):25-36; K. Dockray, 'Why Did the Fifteenth-Century Gentry Marry?', in M. Jones, ed., *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe* (Gloucester, 1986), pp. 61-80; Ann S. Haskell, 'The Paston Women on Marriage in Fifteenth-Century England', *Viator* 4 (1973):459-71; J. W. Kirby, 'Women in the Plumpton Correspondence: Fiction and Reality', in I. Wood and G.A. Loud, eds., *Church and Chronicle in the Later Middle Ages: Essays presented to John Taylor* (London, 1991), pp. 219-33; Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (Abridged edition: Harmondsworth, 1979); Alan MacFarlane, *Marriage and Love in England, 1300-1840* (Oxford, 1987); Susan E. Whyman, *Sociability and Power in late-Stuart England: the Cultural Worlds of the Verneys, 1660-1720* (Oxford, 1999); Whyman, "Paper visits", pp. 15-36.

Hingeston suggests that letters would form the most important source for history *if they survived in a complete series*. As they do not, however, it is clear that they cannot serve as one of the major sources of History, for the main concern of scholars at this time was to create a coherent narrative of events. The same theme emerges still more clearly in the work of some other nineteenth-century writers. In the preface to the first volume in his important 'Original Letters' series, Henry Ellis depicted letters as an important source, but one whose value lay in their potential for supplementing or correcting a pre-established narrative, rather than as major sources in their own right. He writes:

To remove doubts, to verify facts, and to form a clear conception of particular events, the reader must seek *subsidiary* aid, in the dispersed materials of History: of which Original Letters of Eminent Persons in the State form both the largest and the most important portion.⁹

The same argument was presented by Edward Freeman in a series of lectures given at the University of Oxford in the final quarter of the century. He asserts:

Sources of knowledge of other kinds, even if in themselves of higher authority than the narratives, are still, as we cannot help using them, something subsidiary, illustrative, corrective ...¹⁰

The source which Freeman regarded as the most important, and that to which he devoted the remainder of the lecture, was chronicles. With the advent of record history, which broadly coincides with the establishment of History as an independent academic discipline, letters might be expected to assume greater importance.¹¹ For a period letters did indeed gain some prominence. As we have seen, the nineteenth century saw the publication of a large number of the early English letters held in public archives, while family correspondence

⁹Henry Ellis, ed., *Original Letters Illustrative of English History*, 10 vols. in 3 series, (London, 1824-46), 1:I, pp. vii-viii.

¹⁰Edward Freeman, *The Methods of Historical Study: Eight Lectures Read in the University of Oxford in Michaelmas Term, 1884* (London, 1886), p. 170.

¹¹For a useful discussion of 'the advent of record history' see Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838-1886* (Cambridge, 1986).

dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was edited in local Record Society series.¹² However, the desire which arose from the middle of the century to make History a more analytical, even 'scientific' discipline, led to a decline in the value placed on letters as a source.¹³ This change affected scholarship in the two centuries in slightly different ways. In sixteenth-century historiography, the dominating figure of the later twentieth century is G. R. Elton. The views of this scholar were inimical to the use of letter evidence in two respects. First, like his nineteenth-century predecessors, Elton viewed political history as a discipline with a diachronic rather than a synchronic emphasis:

Whatever else history may be, it must at heart be a story ... political history therefore comes first because, above all the forms of historical study, it wants to, even needs to, tell a story.¹⁴

Second, and rather more importantly, Elton seems to associate the decline in the influence of political history with inadequacies in the sources, and specifically with an over-dependence on letters:

The main reason lies in the peculiarly untechnical character of letter evidence. It neither strains the professional understanding of the historian (everybody supposedly can understand letters) nor thereby develops the muscles of his analytical reason... If people rightly complain that so much political history seems intellectually unsatisfying, they should realize that this has to do not so much with the questions asked or the competence of the historian, but with nature of his material which can be intellectually so much

¹²James Gairdner, ed., *Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Reigns of Richard III and Henry VII*, 2 vols., Rolls Series 24 (1861); Hingeston, ed., *Royal and Historical Letters During the Reign of Henry IV*; J. Stevenson, ed., *Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France During the Reign of Henry VI*, 2 vols., Rolls Series 22 (1861-64); Ellis, ed., *Original Letters Illustrative of English History*, M. A. E. Woods, ed., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies of Great Britain*, 3 vols. (London, 1846). Stuart A. Moore, ed., *Letters and Papers of John Shillingford, Mayor of Exeter, 1447-50*, Camden Society n.s. 2 (1871); C. Monro, ed., *Letters of Queen Margaret of Anjou*, Camden Society o.s. 86 (1863); Thomas Stapleton, ed., *The Plumpton Correspondence; written in the Reigns of Edward IV, Richard III, Henry VII and Henry VIII*, Camden Society o.s. 4 (1839); James Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters, 1422-1509 A.D.*, 4 vols. (London, 1872-5).

¹³For a useful discussion of the developments in history in this period see Lawrence Stone, *The past and the present* (Boston and London, 1981).

¹⁴G. R. Elton, *Political History, Principles and Practice* (New York and London, 1970), p. 5.

less demanding than most.¹⁵

Elton's solution is to change the emphasis from personalities to the institutions or administrative machinery of royal government. By so doing the historian can deploy a range of sources - court records, receipts and issues, audits and accounts - which are more 'technical'. These require the type of expertise which only the professional historian can command, in subjects such as Latin, Palaeography and Diplomatic. They therefore, in Elton's view, produce a more authoritative, objective account of the past.¹⁶

The historiography of the fifteenth century has followed a rather different path to that of the sixteenth. Following the insights of K. B. McFarlane, historians rejected a focus on the institutions of central government in favour of close study of the personalities and connections of the governing class, on the affinities of the nobility, and the organisation of political life at the county level.¹⁷ Yet though this approach has reduced the emphasis on narrative, which limits the value of letters to historians of the sixteenth century, it preserves the emphasis on events - on the appointment of individuals to certain offices at particular dates for example, or the transfer of land in legal transactions. In studies written in this tradition, letters therefore continue to function as subsidiary sources - as texts which may occasionally furnish a few pieces of information to supplement those found in the 'main' sources, which are primarily legal records. Though it is seldom stated explicitly, some scholars seem, like Elton, to consider correspondence a type of source material in which it would be dangerous to put too much faith.¹⁸ For example, Christine Carpenter concludes

¹⁵Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 102-03.

¹⁷For discussion of this school of history, its debt to McFarlane, and the main focus of its ideas see the essays in R. H. Britnell and A. J. Pollard, eds., *The McFarlane Legacy: Studies in Late Medieval Politics and Society* (Stroud, 1995).

¹⁸It is interesting to note, for example, how often references to the family archives of the Plumptons, Pastons and Stonors are to documents such as deeds rather than letters. See Simon Payling, *Political Society in Lancastrian England: The Greater Gentry of Nottinghamshire* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 51, 111 inter alia. It is also common to find that, where referred to at all, letters are cited from secondary sources rather than from published editions, suggesting that the authors of these studies do not consider them to be primary sources worth scrutinising directly. See for example Michael Hicks, *Bastard Feudalism* (London, 1995), pp. 44, 58, 180, 197

a summary of the sources used in her study of Warwickshire landed society as follows:

The famous correspondences and a certain amount of literary evidence have also been used, but with a full awareness of the dangers of drawing conclusions from these records alone.¹⁹

Letters are useful to 'breathe life' into the 'dry bones of the data', but they are neither as important nor indeed as reliable as the sources which form the backbones of the study, 'records of the king's government ... deeds, wills and estate accounts'.²⁰

In the past two decades significant changes have occurred in the interests and attitudes of political historians working in both periods. In each case, the newer approaches make letters a source of greater interest and influence. First, in sixteenth-century historiography, the past twenty years have witnessed a shift away from administrative history, and towards a wider view of politics as a social and cultural phenomenon. This has resulted in work on ideas of service and patronage. It has also focussed attention on the symbolic aspects of political exchange and interaction, conceived of as both material and linguistic. Scholarship produced in this new mould has drawn heavily on the evidence of letters.²¹ In the fifteenth century change has been slower, but has moved in a broadly similar direction. While acknowledging their value in documenting political relationships which had previously been neglected, a number of recent articles have begun to question the assumptions of studies of local political

inter alia.

¹⁹Christine Carpenter, *Locality and Polity. A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401-1499* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 10-11.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Barbara J. Harris, 'Property, Power and Personal Relations: Elite Mothers and Sons in Yorkist and Early Tudor England', *Signs* 15 (1990):606-32; eadem, 'Women and Politics in Early Tudor England', *Historical Journal* 33 (1990):259-81; P. W. Fleming, 'Household Servants of the Yorkist and Early Tudor Gentry', in Daniel Williams, ed., *Early Tudor England: Proceedings of the 1987 Harlaxton Symposium* (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 19-36; Karen Newman, 'Sundry Letters, Wordly Goods: The Lisle Letters and Renaissance Studies', *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 26 (1996):139-53; Frank Whigham 'The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 96 (1981): 864-82. For work on material rather than linguistic symbolism see S. Anglo, *Spectacle, Pageantry, and early Tudor Policy* (Oxford, 1969); David Starkey, 'Representation through Intimacy', in Ioan Lewis, ed., *Symbols and Sentiment* (New York, 1977) and the essays that accompany that of Fleming in Williams, ed., *Early Tudor England*.

society. It is now suggested that surveys of this kind have tended to present political connections and interactions in an intellectual or conceptual vacuum.²² Like scholars of the sixteenth century, fifteenth-century historians now advocate an approach to history which takes the values and attitudes of the participants in the political process into account.²³ Like them they now regard aspects of behaviour which were earlier dismissed as formulaic or ritualised as integral to the political process. Though little work has been undertaken in this direction to date, proponents of this new view have frequently alluded to the potential of epistolary sources to tackle these new questions. In recantation of her former view, for example, Carpenter now argues:

We should no longer allow the historians of the lower orders their exclusive use of the 'Annales' clothes that belonged once to a historian of the ruling classes of early medieval Europe... We should ... be looking at the language of politics, at words used in context, in documents of high policy and debate, in letters, in literary and theoretical works.²⁴

Rather than sources which are marginal to the main political narrative, letters seem increasingly to be regarded as essential guides to the mentality of political society. Rather than slippery, untechnical documents, which produce an 'unreal' version of the past, they are now viewed as essential tools for the interpretation of political action in past time.

The Interpretation of Early Vernacular Correspondence

The present moment is a particularly promising one in which to undertake a study of

²²See Christine Carpenter, 'Political and Constitutional History: Before and After McFarlane', in Britnell and Pollard, eds., *The McFarlane Legacy*, pp. 175-206 at p. 188.

²³John Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship* (Cambridge, 1996), Introduction; G. L. Harriss, 'The Dimensions of Politics', in Britnell and Pollard, eds., *The McFarlane Legacy*, pp. 1-21; E. Powell, 'After 'After McFarlane': the Poverty of Patronage and the Case for Constitutional History', in Dorothy J. Clayton, Richard G. Davies and Peter McNiven, eds., *Trade, Devotion and Governance: Papers in Later Medieval History* (Stroud, 1994), pp. 1-16.

²⁴Carpenter, 'Political and Constitutional History', pp. 195-96

political culture based on epistolary sources. As we have seen, however, in the study of social topics - education, marriage, kinship relations - letters have frequently, one might almost say constantly, been in use. The contribution which a new study of such topics might make therefore requires detailed explanation. As I indicated above, my contention in this thesis is that the scholars who have attended to letters have not used them in the most rewarding or most appropriate manner. My criticism concerns three overlapping areas.

i. Practices

The first and most obvious problem with studies which draw heavily on letter-evidence, is that so little is currently known about the production and consumption of ordinary vernacular missives in the period under consideration. An extensive, and indeed very impressive, scholarly literature exists on the Latin *dictamen* or treatise tradition, from its earliest origins in the twelfth century to its gradual decline after the fourteenth.²⁵ Renaissance epistolography, and its relationship to both classical and medieval conventions, has also received scholarly scrutiny. Not only have scholars studied the treatises of humanists such as Erasmus and Vives, but English letter-writing manuals, which appear at the end of the sixteenth century, have been examined in detail.²⁶ What has not hitherto been explored in any systematic fashion, however, is the evidence of real surviving letters.²⁷ As

²⁵For *dictamen* in England see in particular the articles of Martin Camargo: 'Si dictare velis': Versified *Artes Dictandi* and Late Medieval Writing Pedagogy', *Rhetorica* 14 (1996): 265-88; 'Towards a Comprehensive Art of Written Discourse: Geoffrey of Vinsauf and the *Ars Dictaminis*', *Rhetorica* 6 (1988): 167-94; 'A Twelfth-Century Treatise on 'Dictamen' and Metaphor', *Traditio* 47 (1992): 161-213. For work on the European dictaminal tradition see James J. Murphy, *Medieval Rhetoric. A Select Bibliography* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1971), Chapter V: The Art of Letter Writing (*Ars Dictaminis*).

²⁶Ronald Witt, 'Medieval 'Ars Dictaminis' and the Beginnings of Humanism: a New Construction of the Problem', *Renaissance Quarterly* 35 (1982):1-35; Judith Rice Henderson, 'Defining the Genre of the Letter: Juan Luis Vives' *De Conscribendis Epistolis*', *Renaissance & Reformation* n.s. 77 (1983): 89-105; Jean Robertson, *The Art of Letter Writing. An Essay on the Handbooks published in England during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1942); A. Gerlo, 'The *Opus de Conscribendis Epistolis* of Erasmus and the Tradition of the *Ars Epistolica*', in R. R. Bolgar, ed., *Classical Influences on European Culture A.D. 500-1500* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 103-114; Katherine Gee Hornbeak, *The Complete Letter Writer in English*, *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages* 15 (1934); Sanna-Kaisa Tanskanen, 'No Lesse Plesaunt than Profitable': Early Modern Letter-Writing Manuals Revisited', in M. Gustaffson, ed., *Essays and Explorations. A 'Freundschaft' for Liisa Dahl* (Turku, 1996), pp. 145-56.

²⁷Constable's otherwise admirable survey of letter-writing practice is weak on the later period, and also focusses on elite, rather than ordinary letter-writers. Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*,

a result, the relationship between the theoretical texts and actual letter-writing practice in this period remains poorly understood. Perhaps more significantly, as no English letter-writing manuals are known before 1568, the neglect of original letters as evidence has meant that virtually nothing is known about the conventions of letter-writing, or the acquisition of composition skills, for the whole of the fifteenth century.

If we stray beyond the question of composition, the terrain becomes still less charted, and the claims of secondary writers still less securely based. Scholars sometimes assert that fifteenth-century letters appear brusque and informal because more intimate or delicate concerns would have been communicated orally, by letter-bearers.²⁸ Yet the extent to which letters were supplemented by their bearers, and the cultural attitudes held towards oral, as opposed to written communication, has never been explored in any depth. The final part of the epistolary transaction, the reception of letters, remains perhaps even more mysterious, and the suggestions of historians thus even more speculative. For example, Houlbrooke argues that the intimate tone of sixteenth-century letters, as compared to their fifteenth-century predecessors, is produced by the growth of 'epistolary privacy'.²⁹ In order to be convincing, this argument would have to be based on evidence that letters were more likely to be read silently by the later period. Yet though literary scholars, and historians of literacy such as Roger Chartier, have explored the reading of literary and scholarly texts, no study has yet been undertaken of the reception of ordinary vernacular letters.³⁰ The first task of this thesis will therefore be to provide a thorough survey of all the available information on letter-writing practices in the two centuries under consideration. This overview will draw on as wide a range as possible of secondary work, drawing together insights of scholars in

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²⁸ John Taylor, 'Letters and Letter Collections in England 1300-1420', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 24 (1980): 57-70, p. 69.

²⁹ Houlbrooke, *The English Family*, p. 170.

³⁰ See for example Roger Chartier, 'Reading Matter and 'Popular Reading: From the Renaissance to the Seventeenth Century', in Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 269-83.

the fields of rhetoric, literature and history. In contrast to earlier scholarship, this study will concentrate on ordinary, even humble writers, at the expense of elite figures. It will also draw extensively on the textual and material evidence of letters which has hitherto been neglected.

ii. Language

The suggestion that historians should closely examine the production and consumption of letters, as a precondition to interpretation, is one which draws on established disciplinary traditions. As we have seen, Elton himself emphasised the importance of understanding the production and use of historical sources. The two other areas in which I take issue with current scholarly approaches to letters fit less neatly into orthodox historical categories.

The first of these problems concerns historians' approach to language. The first aspect of this twofold problem is well summarised by a quotation from the linguist Norman Blake:

One of the problems in reading the literature of an earlier period is that we find it difficult to shed our current linguistic attitudes although the English of an earlier period is very different in structure from our own ... Although we know Chaucer's English is old, we nevertheless think of it as English and so feel that we can understand it without difficulty ... Paradoxically it may be less deceptive for an Englishman to read a foreign literature, say Greek, as for a foreigner to read Chaucer precisely because in these cases we do make allowances for the cultural gap between us and what we are reading.³¹

Blake's criticism is directed at readers of literary texts. However, the inattentiveness to linguistic difference which he describes, is widely found in the secondary literature on letters. A useful example is provided by the analysis of letters offered by Alan MacFarlane in his survey work *Marriage and Love in England*. MacFarlane begins cautiously, recognising that the language of early correspondence is very different to our own. He warns, for example, that 'there is a tendency for archaic language and a certain formality of style to come between us and the writers'.³² Later, however, this caution is abandoned, as the writer offers

³¹N. F. Blake, *The English Language in Medieval Literature* (London, 1977), p. 11.

³²Alan MacFarlane, *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840* (Oxford, 1986), p. 194.

confident interpretations of what the correspondents 'really meant', intentions which can be understood by the modern reader 'despite the conventions of phrasing'.³³ As no close analysis is offered of the way in which these conventions operate, or of the historical connotation of particular words, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that MacFarlane's method is based on the type of 'instinctive' understanding described by Blake.³⁴

Such explicit statements of interpretative rationale are comparatively rare, particularly in later scholarship. The failure to engage with the historical nature of the language is, however, often implicit in the interpretations of material offered in studies. Several examples of such 'misinterpretations' will be offered in the course of the thesis. One example, which does not bear directly on the topic of the thesis, will perhaps serve to illustrate the point. In the preface to his edition of the Stonor Letters, C. L. Kingsford stated that a rebuke to Elizabeth Stonor for maintaining a 'meyny of boys' refers to the dangers of overspending on display.³⁵ Kingsford has understood the element of criticism in the phrase 'meyny of boys' to refer to the first word - the retinue is too large, and thus too costly. However, if we consider the meaning of these two nouns more closely, a different interpretation seems to emerge. 'Meyny' could, as Kingsford seems to understand it, refer to a crowd or an excessive number of people. In this period, however, it can also mean simply the household servants or retinue of an aristocrat and his family.³⁶ 'Boy', on the other hand, is not the neutral word implied in Kingsford's interpretation. Rather, in the fifteenth century, this term could connote not simply a servant, but also a person of low birth or rank, and even a 'worthless or wicked fellow; a rascal, ruffian, knave'.³⁷ By reinterpreting these two words we produce a very different reading. It now seems possible that Thomas Stonor's criticism

³³Ibid., p. 196.

³⁴This seems supported by MacFarlane's own unspecific description of his method: 'Allowing for a change in style, we nevertheless find a similar undercurrent of closeness'. Ibid., p. 194.

³⁵SL, p. xxxi.

³⁶MED, meine, (n.) It seems likely that Kingsford was aware of the technical meaning of 'meyny', but he may nevertheless have been unconsciously influenced by the cognate 'many'.

³⁷MED, boie (n.)1

of his sister-in-law concerned not her extravagance, but rather her taste; the retinue is of inferior quality, not of excessive size.

When one considers the close linguistic analysis to which medieval texts, including letters, have been subjected, it perhaps seems difficult to understand why historians have ignored the problems inherent in interpreting early English correspondence.³⁸ There is, however, a logic to this neglect, which goes beyond historians' traditional unfamiliarity with the techniques of linguistic analysis. Much of the scholarship produced by linguists in the first half of the twentieth century was not only very technical, but also pursued questions very different to those which a historian would ask of the same material.³⁹ In most articles written before the middle of the century the emphasis is not on writers, and the way in which they used language as a means of self-expression, but on language itself, understood as a process or system. More recently, however, students of early English texts have begun to pursue new avenues of research. In the 1960s scholars analysing contemporary speech began to consider the influence of factors such as status and gender on the linguistic choices of speakers.⁴⁰ In the past few decades scholars interested in the study of historical language have begun to adopt these new approaches.⁴¹ Indeed, in 1996 a group of scholars at Helsinki began to assemble a corpus of English Correspondence as a source for the analysis of the

³⁸G. Neumann, *Die Orthographie der Paston Letters* (Marburg, 1904); Asta Kilhbohm, *A Contribution to the Study of Fifteenth Century English* (Uppsala, 1926).

³⁹Much of the early work of Norman Davis also falls into this category. See *inter alia* 'The Text of Margaret Paston's Letters', *Medium Aevum* 17 (1949):15-16; idem, 'A Scribal Problem in the Paston Letters', *English and German Studies* 4 (1951-52):31-64; idem, 'Scribal Variation in Late Fifteenth-Century English', in *Mélanges de Linguistique et de Philologie* (Paris, 1959), pp. 95-103.

⁴⁰A useful anthology of seminal articles, including William Labov's famous study of New York, is Pier Paolo Giglioli, *Language and Social Context* (London, 1972). William Downes, *Language and Society* (Bungay, 1984), Peter Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics* (Harmondsworth, 1983) and Dennis Freeborn, *Varieties of English* (Basingstoke, 1986) are useful surveys of the topics and approaches covered by sociolinguists.

⁴¹The process by which social approaches came to be an accepted part of the study of historical language is described in James Milroy, *Linguistic Variation and Change: On the Historical Sociolinguistics of English* (Oxford, 1992) and Suzanne Romaine, *Socio-historical linguistics: Its Status and Methodology* (Cambridge, 1982). Blake, *The English Language in Medieval Literature* is an early example of this kind of approach. See her also particularly the work of David Burnley.

impact of factors such as gender and status on language use.⁴² In the discipline of History the same period has brought a growing recognition from scholars of the intrinsic importance of language to an understanding of the texts which historians analyse as source material, both to modes of thought in the past and more generally.⁴³ The present juncture is thus a particularly propitious one in which to attempt an historical study of correspondence based on detailed linguistic analysis.⁴⁴

My second criticism concerns a different kind of naivety or inattentiveness towards language in historians' analysis of letters. Beyond their failure to engage with the problem of historicity, scholars, have, until recently, tended to regard early letters as naive or speech-like documents, which do not merit the kind of close linguistic analysis extended to literary texts. In her preface to the *Lisle Letters*, for example, Muriel St-Clare Byrne suggests:

It is the nearest thing to the recording of the very accents of speech which we shall find until the drama comes into its own and inherits this vocabulary and these natural speech rhythms.⁴⁵

⁴²This work has begun to bear fruit in an article literature. See, for example, Helena Raumolin-Brunberg and Terttu Nevalainen, 'Like father (un)like son: a sociolinguistic approach to the language of the Cely family', in Jacek Fisiak, ed., *Studies in Middle English Linguistics* (Berlin and New York, 1997), pp. 489-511; Terttu Nevalainen, 'Gender Differences in the Evolution of Standard English: Evidence from the Corpus of Early English Correspondence', *Journal of English Linguistics* 28 (2000): 38-59.

⁴³The new attention to language among historians falls into two categories. The interest of the first group lies in the analysis of language as a socio-cultural phenomenon. This strand was inspired by the *Annales* school, with its emphasis on *mentalité* in past time. This approach is perhaps best represented by Peter Burke and Roy Porter, eds., *Language, Self and Society. A Social History of Language* (Cambridge 1991) and Penelope J. Corfield, ed., *Language, History and Class* (Cambridge, 1991). The second group of historians is motivated by postmodernist epistemological concerns. Their focus is often on social categories and their constitution in linguistic terms. See, for example, Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988). A useful overview of these developments is offered in Brian Stock, 'History, Literature and Medieval Textuality', *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986): 7-21.

⁴⁴Though I will not be drawing directly on the literature of the Helsinki scholars, it has been valuable in indicating how older scholarship may be adapted to shed light on socio-historical questions. In particular, it has suggested the way in which the older literature on regional language can be used to explore the status and cultural identity of speakers, rather than wider linguistic processes.

⁴⁵Muriel St-Clare Byrne, ed., *The Lisle Letters*, 6 vols. (Chicago, 1981): I, p. xxv. As with the neglect of the historical location of speech, these attitudes are more frequently to be seen in the way in which historians discuss letters than in direct statements. As far as I am aware, in historical scholarship on letters, style has never been considered as a category which relates to the construction of identity and meaning. Rhetoric too, though sometimes alluded to in passing, is never examined in the kind of depth which would be necessary to draw safe conclusions concerning meaning.

Writing only five years ago, the founders of the Helsinki Corpus of Early English Correspondence state:

We decided to limit our choice to personal letters, because .. the language of even early correspondence often resembles spoken registers more closely than most other types of writing.⁴⁶

This view, that letters are documents which are unselfconscious or 'unliterary' in character, has been reinforced by the way in which these texts have been treated by scholars working in the discipline of Literature. Like older political historians, literary critics have tended to use letters as a 'supplementary' source; letters have been used to study the lives of poets or novelists, but have not themselves been regarded as texts worthy of literary analysis.⁴⁷ However, just as historians have recently come to regard language as an important area of study, so literary scholars have broadened their disciplinary parameters to include a wider range of texts.⁴⁸ In this reorganisation, letters are one of the categories of texts to have gained the greatest attention. Scholars looking for female-authored texts written before the seventeenth century have, for example, placed letters at the heart of their project.⁴⁹

⁴⁶Terttu Nevalainen and Helena Raumolin-Burnberg, *Sociolinguistics and Language History. Studies based on the Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, 1996), p. 40. See also Laetitia Lyell, *A Medieval Post-Bag* (London, 1934), p. 14: '[T]hey wrote almost exactly as they spoke with a remarkable freshness and spontaneity which is necessarily lacking in their more elaborate predecessors and successors.' See also the comments of John Fenn quoted above.

⁴⁷Even if it were accepted that letters were a direct reflection a speech, it would still be difficult to argue that this rendered their meaning transparent. Derrida has famously argued that the view that speech is prior to, or more authentic than writing, is a dangerous misapprehension. More practical studies of speech and writing have also concluded that the distinction between the two modes of communication is overdrawn; the organisation of discourse is often as dependent on situation and subject as on the whether it is presented orally or graphically. J. Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context', *John Hopkins Textual Studies* 1 (1977):172-97; Douglas Biber, *Variation across Speech and Writing* (Cambridge and New York, 1988), pp. 122-45.

⁴⁸A good example of a scholar who rejects the traditional boundaries between literary and non-literary texts is Paul Strohm: for example his *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton, 1992), p. 9 ('discarding outworn categorizations – like "literary" versus "non-literary" or "fictional" versus "historical"'.)

⁴⁹Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, *Writing the Female Voice. Essays on Epistolary Literature* (Boston, 1989); Deborah Kaplan, 'Representing Two Cultures. Jane Austen's Letters', in Shari Benstock, ed., *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writing* (London, 1988), pp. 211-229; Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, eds., *Dear Sister. Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia, 1993); James Fitzmaurice and Martine Rey, 'Letters by Women in England, the French Romance, and Dorothy Osborne', in Jean R. Brink ed., *The Politics of Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Kirksville, 1989), pp. 148-160; Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1994). Some writers

If we consider letters in the light of this scholarship, we see that literary categories and techniques may, in fact, be of considerable importance in understanding letters. The first 'literary' category, which is of considerable importance in the interpretation of fifteenth and sixteenth-century correspondence, is style. As the comments which we have quoted make clear, the prose in which many fifteenth-century letters are written often does seem artless, or unselfconscious. However, if we look closely, it soon becomes clear that even the simplest letters contain 'writerly' elements; authors are striving to create certain effects in relation to both reader and writer. In the following century the situation is almost reversed. Much of the correspondence of the sixteenth century strikes the modern reader as highly-wrought and artificial. When we look more closely, however, we realise that this style is what was considered a 'familiar' mode of expression. It is a mode of writing considered appropriate to more informal contexts, and even regarded as resembling conversational speech.⁵⁰ In the absence of the close linguistic analysis associated with literary scholarship, such distinctions and relationships can be misunderstood, producing quite radical misreadings of the text.

A second area in which the 'literary', close reading technique is useful is the analysis of patterned or recurrent lexical groups, or what might be broadly characterised as 'discourse' or 'rhetoric'. Historians have seldom examined the terminology of salutations in any detail; close analysis of phrases, or groups of vocabulary in the body of letters, is rarer still. Yet, as we shall see below, close examination of the patterns in which these groupings occur can lead to conclusions very different to those drawn by historians using looser, more

in other fields have also started to use letters as means of exploring political discourse. See 'The Idiom of Rural Politics', in Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion* (Berkeley and L.A., 1994), pp. 140-93 and Richard Firth Green, 'John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature', in B. Hanawalt, ed., *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context* (Minneapolis, 1992), pp. 176-200.

⁵⁰This is not to say that more formal modes of writing cannot be identified in the letters of the same period. However, the distinction between the two styles can only be made on the basis of detailed analysis of contemporary evidence, and of prescriptive texts.

'instinctive' methods. For example, by failing to subject their epistolary rhetoric to close scrutiny, I believe that historians have fundamentally misinterpreted the letters sent to Henry V by the mayor and aldermen of London. Rather than the stereotyped, slightly dated obsequiousness which other commentators see in these letters, I consider these missives to display an unusual, perhaps even daring, appropriation of aristocratic rhetoric. Historians reading letters exchanged by family members have fallen into similar traps. Because they have not placed the tropes of family letters in a comparative perspective, scholars have misread a discourse based around concepts such as 'love' and 'tenderness' as a private rhetoric of emotion. Analysis shows that these terms, though probably 'genuine' in their invocation of feeling, are associated with a discourse of service rather than one of 'private' intimacy or kinship. In this thesis it will be my endeavour to show that close analysis of language, on both a literary and a more narrowly linguistic level, is a necessary precondition for any reliable interpretation of ordinary vernacular letters.

iii. Materiality

The final fault which can be found in current scholarly approaches to letters is one which also transcends the usual disciplinary boundaries. In the past, writers have shown some awareness of the material aspects of letters. Mention is sometimes made of the seals which were used to close letters, particularly where these are distinctive or unusual.⁵¹ Historians have also sometimes argued that the changes in letters observable in the sixteenth century are linked to another physical factor - the type of hand in which missives are written.⁵² Hitherto, these efforts have, however, always been cursory; these elements of letters have, to borrow the language of the political historian, been regarded as 'supplementary' to their meaning. Letters have not, as yet, been viewed holistically, as they must surely have been by their original writers and recipients. Unlike the criticisms made above, this insight does not arise directly out of wider trends in recent scholarship. As Harvey and McGuinness have recently noted, the study of seals has largely remained the province of antiquarians rather

⁵¹ Alison Wall, ed., *Two Elizabethan Women: Correspondence of Joan and Maria Thynne 1575-1611*, Wiltshire Record Society 38 (1982), pp. xxxiii-iv.

⁵² Houlbrooke, *English Family*, p. 170.

than of professional academics.⁵³ Art-historical explorations of the subject, though stimulating, still remain limited in both scope and number.⁵⁴ Lack of interest in the physical form of letters continues to result in scholarly editions of correspondence which present little or no information as to whether documents are dictated or autograph.⁵⁵ These factors render a proper consideration of letters as material artefacts difficult. In this thesis some initial steps will, however, be taken towards an understanding of letters as objects as well as texts. Throughout the thesis close attention is paid to the physical aspects of letters. I will closely examine the type of seals used, and the iconography of their matrices. Modes of composition will be closely scrutinised. I will also consider an aspect of letters which has hitherto been almost entirely overlooked by scholars; layout, or the organisation of text on the page.

Sources and Structure of the Thesis

My aim in this thesis has been to examine the broadest range of extant correspondence possible, within the given time constraints. I have considered royal correspondence written in both English and in Anglo-Norman French for the evidence which it provides of stylistic conventions, and particularly for modes of expression between family members at this social level. Non-Latin letters of this class have also been examined for evidence of general letter-writing practices, but no attempt has been made to be exhaustive in the treatment of this group of documents. Civic and family correspondence, on the other hand, have received detailed scrutiny. The case study of the civic arena is based on the records of the cities of Bristol, York and Coventry. These cities were selected because their muniments are

⁵³P. D. A. Harvey and A. McGuinness, *A Guide to British Medieval Seals* (London, 1996), p. 78.

⁵⁴The most interesting literature on this subject produced thus far is the articles of Brigitte Bedos-Rezak. See for example Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, 'Women, Seals and Power in Medieval France, 1150-1350', in Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, eds., *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens, Georgia, 1988), pp. 61-82; eadem, 'Towns and Seals: Representation and Signification in Medieval France', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 72 (1990):35-48.

⁵⁵Hanham's edition of the Cely Letters (*CL*), though executed to a high level of accuracy, presents very little evidence concerning the authorship of letters. The model in terms of information on the physical aspects of letters remains Davis's edition of the Paston letters (*PL*).

available in full scholarly editions, a condition which facilitates close examination of a larger body of material than would otherwise have been possible. For the same reason the London letters examined in chapter three are quoted from Chamber and Daunt's scholarly edition rather than from the originals. The petitions of London, on the other hand, are available for the most part only in calendared form, or as translations in Riley's comprehensive *Memorials*. All transcriptions and references, unless otherwise stated, are to the originals in the Letter Books held at the Corporation of London Record Office. Some material, supplementary to that available in published form, is likewise taken from original documents in the archives of York.

The case study of family letters is drawn from the widest possible range of printed sources. This has been supplemented where possible by study of the originals of published letters, and also of material which has never been edited. The first category includes the letters of the Celys, Marchalls, Stonors, and Lises, all of which have been available to me in microfilm form. I have also examined the originals of many of the letters published by Ellis and Wood from the Cottonian manuscripts in the British Library. Though a comprehensive survey of unpublished letters has not been possible, every effort has been made to examine a sample large enough to be considered representative. The published fifteenth-century correspondences have been contextualised through a broad exploration of the fifteenth-century letters preserved in the volumes of SC1. Similar efforts have been made in relation to the letters of the sixteenth century. Collections which have been examined include the letters of the Paston, Thynne, Carnsewe, Bourne and Talbot families.

Though these documents form the main focus of the thesis, I have endeavoured to examine a wide range of contextual material. First, in order to assess the typicality of letter-evidence, or the valancy of particular lexical or discursive features, I have drawn on a range of contemporary 'literary' material, including poetry, prose romances and drama. Second, our understanding of the relationship between epistolary and social conventions is contingent on a thorough knowledge of pedagogic texts. I have examined printed editions of a wide range of letter-writing treatises. In addition, I have considered sixteenth and early seventeenth-century letter-writing manuals in the original, and have also examined some of the dictamen manuals in manuscript form. Finally, I have considered a wide range of seals

discussed in secondary literature, and also described in catalogues and antiquarian works.

As we noted above, one of the most obvious shortcomings in current historical scholarship based on letters is the lack of any real, detailed understanding of how letters were used in the past, and how they were regarded by those who wrote and received them. This information will be of considerable importance for future studies which use letters as a historical source. The first section of this thesis will therefore be devoted to a rigorous examination of the evidence for letter-writing practices in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The discussion will be divided into five parts. The first will consider the problem of genre. It will ask, in as practical manner as possible, how ordinary correspondents understood letters as a category of text or writing. The middle three categories are also pragmatic in emphasis. They will be presented in the order in which they appear in the letter-writing process: composition, transmission and finally reception.

The final section is slightly different in nature. Over the course of study it became increasingly clear not only that women's relationship to letter-writing was very different to that of their male peers, but that this difference, and its changing contours, had been poorly understood in the past. The final, extended section, will therefore, be devoted to examining this important question in some detail, and to correcting the misapprehensions found in the current literature. In certain respects this study represents a work of collation; it will summarise findings and approaches found in different scholarly literatures, which for disciplinary reasons have seldom been considered together, though they describe aspects of the same problem. In two areas, however, it will be innovative. First, it will draw on 'literary' representations of letter-writing as well as on pedagogic materials. Second, it will replace the emphasis on pedagogic material seen in extant scholarship with a more practical view of the problems, based on a close reading of a large number of documents which survive from the period.

The second half of the thesis is composed of two case studies. The first of these will consider epistolary documents produced in the civic arena. As we argued above, political historians

writing over the past century have generally taken a somewhat sceptical view of letters as a form of source material. However, urban historians have pioneered an approach to politics which focusses on culture rather than events, and on ideas rather than individual personalities; this makes a larger role for correspondence possible. The case study is divided into two parts. The first examines social relations within four urban centres: London, York, Bristol and Coventry. It explores both the difference in relations between citizens and governors in the four settlements, and the ways in which these changed over the course of the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This investigation will be based in part on correspondence exchanged by members of the civic elite, and between cities. The main focus, however, will be on a group of documents which have hitherto suffered even greater neglect; the petitions submitted by the citizenry to their governors over the course of our period.

The second part of this case study will complement the first, by exploring the way in which two of the cities in our first section, London and York, conducted relations not with other urban entities, but with external agencies, and in particular with the crown. This will explore the similarities, but also the striking differences in the ways in which the governors positioned themselves within the complex framework of fifteenth-century social relations. In both sections an attempt will be made to address the problems of earlier scholarship on letters, by pursuing the methodological approaches outlined above. This body of material survives in the form of copies, and little can therefore be said concerning their original presentation. However, the aim of viewing letters as material as well as linguistic artefacts, which I outlined above will be addressed through close study of the original seals under which the letters were sent. In both studies close attention is paid to language, in ways which are uncharacteristic of conventional historical studies. In the section on petitions I explore the vocabulary of status, examining the different connotations of words located in parallel discourses, and at different points in time. In the study of letters I consider the regional variety of language used, and consider the implications of this for the construction of social identity. In both studies I also study prose style, and the kind of rhetoric which writers invoke to achieve their goals.

The second case study will follow a similar pattern, but will take a more traditional topic as its focus. Above we noted the shortcomings in social historians' use of letters; this section of the thesis will tackle these by offering an extended analysis of one of the subjects most frequently discussed through letters, family relationships. Rather than tackling two interrelated subjects, this study will present an extended discussion of this one question, divided into two chapters along chronological lines; the first considers the period from 1400 to 1500, the second covers the whole of the sixteenth century. The second chapter includes a lengthy concluding section, which analyses the results presented in the whole of the preceding study. As in our study of the culture of the civic arena, this examination will deploy a variety of approaches traditionally associated with disciplines other than history. In the past historians have invoked the rise in literacy rates as an explanation for changes in family correspondence. They have not, however, analysed the material evidence in any depth. In this study the mode in which letters were written - whether they were dictated or autograph - will be explored in depth, and some attention will also be paid to the seals used to close such correspondence. No analysis will be offered here of the regional variety of language used, but close attention will be paid to lexis, both at the level of the individual item, and at that of groups of items, or rhetorical patterns. Finally, as in the preceding study, close attention will be paid to questions of prose style, and whether these can be more closely related to cultural changes, such as the growing influence of humanist precepts, or to genuine social change occurring in the period.

Before we can move to the first study one final explanation is necessary. Why does the thesis cover such a long time period? Why does it straddle the conventionally accepted divide between the 'medieval' and 'Early Modern' periods? The answer has two parts or aspects. The first is the opportunity which this particular, extended segment of time offers to achieve one of the main goals of the thesis; the discrimination of social from linguistic change. Two events in this period offer us an opportunity to do this. The first is the well-known shift away from Anglo-Norman French and towards English as the main medium of social intercourse. In letters and petitions this transition begins to occur in the second decade of the fifteenth century. The nature of the transition - its comparative suddenness, and the apparent lack of pedagogic guidance available to letter-writers in the new medium - offers an opportunity to consider whether the 'formal' aspects of letters, such as

salutations, relate to social phenomena, or whether they exist merely as a set of linguistic conventions. The second event is the advent of humanist influence; by the final quarter of the sixteenth century the *ars dictaminis* had clearly been displaced as the main source of guidance on letter-writing by a new programme based on the correspondence of authorities such as Cicero and Quintilian. By observing the extent to which these new conventions effected a change in letter-writing style, we can form a view of the relationship between social and educational factors in the structuring of epistolary discourse.

The second reason for selecting such an extended period is precisely because it does cross the putative later medieval/early modern divide. In reading the secondary literature on letters, and particularly on the pedagogy of letter-writing, it became clear that there was almost as little contact between the scholars of these two periods as there was between those working in different disciplines. One result is that false assumptions are made concerning the preceding or succeeding period. Another, still more damaging consequence, which follows directly from this first, is that accounts of change over the period are fragmentary and often distorted. In both my study of letter-writing practices, and my exploration of family relationships, I challenge the prevailing view of chronology and causation. The consideration of a period which covers two centuries thus produced tangible benefits for our understanding of both periods.

CHAPTER ONE

LETTER-WRITING PRACTICES, 1400-1600

In the introduction to the thesis we explored some of the shortcomings of current scholarship on letters. One criticism which we levelled at past scholarship was that in these studies letters were unnaturally dissected and compartmentalised: aspects of letters which are organically related, such as handwriting, spelling and language, were treated as discrete entities. Our second concern was that scholars researching letters failed to contextualize their studies adequately; too little attention was paid to the changing processes conditioning the production and consumption of letters at different periods. The two case studies which form the second half of the thesis will respond to the first problem. In these the material, linguistic and rhetorical aspects of letters will be read against each other to form composite studies of civic and family identities. The present chapter will attempt to address the second problem, the inadequacy of our current understanding of letter-writing practices in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. My aim in this section is to present a comprehensive review of evidence for letter-writing practices between 1400 and 1600. The study will unify the work of scholars working in different periods and in different fields. It will also deploy a broad range of sources and a variety of techniques with the aim of shedding new light on problems which have sometimes been considered intractable. The survey will consider four aspects of letter-writing practice: the idea of genre; precepts governing composition; modes of transmission; methods of reception. To conclude, I will consider the relationship between women and the epistolary genre throughout the period of study.

Genre

The question of genre is an extremely complex one. Concerning perceptions of letters at the close of the Middle Ages two general statements can, however, be made with some confidence. First, the letter was an extremely important category of writing throughout the medieval period; as a genre it was considerably more influential than it is today. One clear indication of this found in the organisation of the body of theory associated with the genre, the *ars dictaminis*. Most modern scholars use the terms *dictamen* and *ars dictaminis* as though they were equivalent to 'the art of letter-writing'. It is important to recognise,

however, that these expressions actually designated a wider field. According to one treatise-writer, for example:

Dictamen sic diffinitur. dictamen est literalis edicio, venustate sermonum egregia, sententiarum coloribus adornata.

Dictamins autem plures sunt species. dictamen aliud est metricum, aliud prosaicum. de metrico nihil ad presens.

Prosaici vero plures sunt species: oracio, rethorica, epistola et etiam pretermisiss aliis de epistolis agamus.¹

Dictamen then is the art of written discourse, as governed by the rules of rhetoric; it is a subject of which letter-writing forms only one part.² The reason that *ars dictaminis* is usually treated as being synonymous with epistolary theory, is that for the most part this is the only category or genre of writing which the treatise writers go on to discuss. The fact that letters were the most theorised branch of rhetoric both reflects and conditions a second; in this period a very diverse range of documents were written in the form of letters. In the High Middle Ages theological treatises and sermons were often framed as letters.³ By the later Middle Ages more popular works also often also borrowed the trappings of the genre. For example, the courtesy text *Stans Puer ad Mensam* opens 'Go, lytel bylle, bareyn of elloquence! Pray yonge childer, þat þe shall se or reede .. to taken heede!'⁴ The *Secreta Secretorum*, a didactic text which enjoyed considerable popularity in the fifteenth-century, is written as a series of letters sent to King Alexander from his mentor Aristotle.⁵ Some of mystic Richard Rolle's texts are written in the form of 'Epistles'.⁶

The second conclusion, which is closely related to the first, is that throughout the medieval

¹'Ars Dictandi aus Orleans', in L. Rockinger, ed., *Briefsteller und Formelbücher des eilften bis vierzehnten Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols., Quellen und Erörterungen zur bayersichen und deutschen Geschichte 9 (1863):I, p. 101. Many further examples are found within the same text.

²Literally it is the art of dictation, which in the twelfth century was equivalent to the art of composition.

³Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*, Typologie des Sources du Moyen Age Occidental 17 (1976), pp. 14-15.

⁴John Lydgate, *Stans Puer ad Mensam* in F. J Furnivall, ed., *Early English Meals and Manners*, EETS o.s. 32 (1868; reprint 1973), pp. 275-81.

⁵M. A. Manzalouni, ed., *Secreta Secretorum: nine English versions*, EETS o.s. 276 (1965).

⁶Hope Emily Allen, *English Writings of Richard Rolle Hermit of Hampole* (Oxford, 1931), pp. 59-72.

period the letter was an extremely flexible, one might even say a loosely defined, genre. The standard dictaminal definition of the letter was 'a suitable arrangement of words set forth to express the intended sentiment of the sender'.⁷ Judged according to this standard, a great many texts which today would be assigned to quite different categories would have qualified as 'genuine' letters. One such group comprises texts written in verse. According to current systems of categorisation verse epistles would be classed as poems rather than as 'real' letters. In later medieval England, however, texts of this kind seem to have been archived alongside ordinary vernacular missives written in prose. Indeed, in some cases they even seem to have been used as 'real' instruments of communication.⁸ Among the Paston letters, for example, we find three complete poems which seem either to have been sent, or to have been intended as letters.⁹ Two other ordinary prose letters in this collection contain short sections in verse.¹⁰ Though apparently a collection of legal evidence, the Armbrugh Roll contains a series of love poems alongside letters and petitions. Carpenter states that the poems 'are written out as if they were letters and, at time they turn into prose. This might suggest that they were indeed meant to be letters'.¹¹ The context in which these verses were preserved - in collections dominated by 'real' prose letters - strengthens the contention that the verse epistles were viewed as 'genuine' letters by contemporaries.

Letters seem not to have been clearly distinguished from verse epistles in this period. It is also more difficult than one might realise to differentiate 'letters' from many other documents commonly found in family archives. Though some scholars, who have adopted a prescriptive approach towards their material, have drawn clear distinctions between 'ordinary letters' and legal instruments such as writs, mandates or petitions, others, who have based their classifications on contemporary perceptions, have noted the blurred

⁷James Murphy, ed., *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1971), p. 7.

⁸Linne Mooney has argued that a love poem preserved in Trinity college, MS R.3.19 was exchanged by individuals in a real romantic relationship. Linne Mooney, "A Woman's Reply to her Lover" and Four other new Courtly Love Lyrics in Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.3.19', *Medium Aevum* 67 (1998):235-56 at pp. 243-44.

⁹*PL:I*, Nos. 351 and 393; *PL:II*, No. 776.

¹⁰*PL:I*, Nos. 77 and 415.

¹¹Christine Carpenter, ed., *The Armbrugh Papers* (Woodbridge, 1998), p. 58.

boundaries between these different types of writing.¹² Such scholars have noted the identity of function between diplomata and letters; all of these documents conform to the 'intentio mittentis' criterion, and in this period many 'ordinary' letters bore a legal force which 'private' letters now usually lack today.¹³ More importantly, critics have shown that later medieval letters were closely linked to other documents in terms of structure. For example, all of these texts begin with a salutation and end with a testamentary or dating clause. All contain narrative sections, followed by a conclusion drawn from the premises, whether this is given in the form of an order, petition or grant.¹⁴ Indeed, according to H. G. Richardson, the resemblance between these different types of documents is natural:

The dictatores were concerned not only with letter-writing but also with the composition of deeds and all those aspects for which writing is used. This is, of course, very natural. Early deeds are hardly to be distinguished from letters...¹⁵

Generic form and systems of archiving both suggest that verse epistles and documents such as petitions were not clearly distinguished from letters. The affinity between these different types of texts seems to be confirmed by reference to one further body of evidence, that of terminology. According to Pierre Chaplais, after the reign of Richard I any document produced by royal government which was not a 'carta' came to be categorised by the broad term 'littere'.¹⁶ Specific types of document such as writs had their own names, but all appear

¹²Hubert Hall draws distinctions between 'epistolary' and other styles in official documents. See Hubert Hall, *A Formula Book of English Official Historical Documents* (New York, 1908) and idem, *Studies in English Historical Documents* (New York, 1908).

¹³In this period letters were frequently used as guarantees of future payment or to witness the receipt of money. The force of 'ordinary' letters is well illustrated by the case of Nicholas Ketringham, who was punished at the pillory in London in 1418 for the extortion of money through the use of a 'letter & obligacion, falsly contrefetid & forgyd'. R. W. Chambers and Marjorie Daunt, eds., *A Book of London English* (Oxford, 1931), p. 96.

¹⁴*ACE*, pp. 6-7, 21-22.

¹⁵H. G. Richardson, 'Letters of the Oxford Dictatores', in H.E. Salter, W.A. Pantin and H. G. Richardson, eds, *Formularies which bear on the History of Oxford*, 2 vols., Oxford Historical Society n.s. 4-5 (1942) II, pp. 329-450 at p. 331. Several other authorities agree with Richardson. Patt states that 'public and private documents were drawn up in a format resembling letters, making a knowledge of *ars dictaminis* mandatory (but also lucrative) for notaries'. William D. Patt, 'The Early "Ars Dictaminis" as Response to a Changing Society', *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 9 (1979): 133-55 at p. 135. Constable summarizes the work of others as follows: 'In fact, as other diplomatists have recognized, there is no clear line of demarcation between public and official 'documents' and unofficial and private 'letters' in the Middle Ages'. Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*, pp. 22-23.

¹⁶Pierre Chaplais, *English Royal Documents King John - Henry VI, 1199-1461* (Oxford, 1971), p. 13.

to have been regarded as part of this wider group.¹⁷ A similar lack of precision is seen in the description of missives in the vernacular. Most texts were described by their writers as 'letter' or 'letters'. Yet as the Latin suggests, and as the *Oxford English Dictionary* shows, in this period this word was not clearly distinguished from the more general concept of 'writing' or 'writings'.¹⁸ The second commonest term in use in the period is 'bill'. In 1425, for example, William Paston I sent a lawyer 'a trewe instruccion of þe seyde matier closed with þis bille'. Some time in 1450 John Rugeley requested Robert Armbrugh 'sende me a bille by the brynger of thys yf ye stonde as the vicar seyth'.¹⁹ A letter sent by Dame Agnes Plumpton in 1504 instructed the bearer 'To Sir Richard Plumpton be thes byll deliuered in hast'.²⁰ However, the Middle English noun 'bille' refers to memoranda, petitions and pamphlets as well as letters.²¹ It is also the term most commonly applied to verse epistles.²² The only term which seems to bear a more restricted meaning in the Middle Ages is 'epistula'. In late Antiquity this term was used to designate private letters, as opposed to the official missives produced by the imperial chanceries. In the medieval period, however, this term seems to have become restricted to letters written by the ancients, and particularly to the writings of the Apostle Paul.²³ Vernacular equivalents of the 'epistula', such as 'pystyll' or 'epistel' are seldom applied to ordinary missives. Rather, like the Latin term, these words are generally applied to the letters of religious or classical authorities.²⁴

¹⁷ Similar observations have been made concerning the diplomata of France, Italy and Germany by A. Giry, *Manuel de diplomatique* (Paris, 1894), p. 9 and H. Bresslau, *Handbuch der Urkundenlehre für Deutschland und Italien*, 2 vols (Leipzig, 1912):I, p. 2.

¹⁸ *OED*, letter (n.)1

¹⁹ Carpenter, ed., *Armbrugh Papers*, pp. 179-80 at p. 180.

²⁰ *PL*:I, No. 2, pp. 2-4 at p. 3; Joan Kirby, ed., *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, Camden Society 5th series 8 (1996), No. 189, p. 173.

²¹ *MED*, bille (n). *OED*, bill (n.)3

²² Rossell Hope Robbins, *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (Oxford, 1955), Nos. 189, 190, 194 inter alia.

²³ R. E. Latham, ed., *Revised Medieval Latin Word List* (London, 1965), p. 167.

²⁴ *MED*, epistel (n.) I have found only one exception. In 1479 John Paston II wrote 'Also, when I was wyth myn oncle I had a longe pystyll of hym that ye had sent Pekok to Paston'. *PL*:I, No. 381, p. 614-16 at p. 615.

Some clear continuities between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries can be traced in attitudes towards letters. In the sixteenth century as earlier, letters were a popular way of airing topics of debate and of offering instructions to the young. Indeed, according to Cecil Clough, letters may even have become more important in this period. He suggests:

By the turn of the fifteenth century the letter was replacing the oration as the prime means by which scholars, and particularly those devoted to the cult of Antiquity, disseminated their ideas and made their case in scholarly controversy.²⁵

In all three of areas which we examined above, however, subtle transformations are evident. Together these amount to a significant change in the definition of the epistolary genre. The first area in which change can be identified is that of terminology. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, though 'letter' persists in certain set phrases as a way of referring to legal documents, by the sixteenth century the general meaning 'anything written', derived from the Latin 'litterae' was beginning to lose currency. Though the word 'bille' seems to be used to describe letters up to the reign of Henry VIII, correspondents writing later in the sixteenth century do not refer to their missives in this fashion.²⁶ Conversely, by the later sixteenth century, 'epistle', a word formerly reserved for the description of the texts of classical authors, was now used to refer to ordinary vernacular letters. This expression seems to join 'letter' as a new, specific way of defining letters, as kind of text exchanged by two parties which lacked legal force.

An important corollary of this move is the change in the structure or 'diplomatic' of letters. As we saw earlier, in the later Middle Ages writs, petitions and bills of exchange had borne a set structure very similar to that found in ordinary vernacular correspondence. Documents of an official character - charters, petitions and letters patent - retain this form to the end of the period and beyond. In the second half of the sixteenth century, however, ordinary 'personal' missives come to be organised according to different conventions, eschewing elaborate introductions and the rigid structure prescribed by the *dictatores*. A letter sent by a gentlewoman to her kinsman in 1584 begins as follows, for example:

²⁵ Cecil H. Clough, 'The Cult of Antiquity: Letters and Letter Collections' in *idem*, ed., *Cultural Aspects of the Italian Renaissance. Essays in Honour of Paul Oscar Kristeller* (Manchester and New York, 1976), pp. 33-67

²⁶ BL, MS Sloane 1584, f. 30r.

It is not the difference of tyme past, nor the distaunce of place nowe, right worshipfull, that doth or maye make mee ever to forgett the lyneall discent naturallie throwen on me by birth and bloude from yo^r worthy howse; butt as one poor in powre, yet great in goodwill, I wishe yo as well as a dyinge bodye to a synful soule.²⁷

Perhaps most distinctive of all the changes in this period, however, is the change in patterns of letter-conservation. In the twelfth century the letters of famous authors were collected and anthologised as a literary form.²⁸ In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, letters are seldom preserved together as a genre or class. The London Letter-Books, which contain letters to and from the mayor and aldermen of the city, take their name from the alphabetical characters by which they are ordered, not from their contents. Both these registers, and those surviving from other cities in the same period, preserve copies of a variety of documents alongside correspondence. Equally misleading is the term 'letter book' for the registers of monastic institutions. As Pantin has shown, volumes of this kind characteristically contain not just letters but indentures, grants, mandates, certificates and even accounts of the elections of abbots or priors.²⁹ The archiving of letters preserved in non-institutional contexts is more difficult to reconstruct. The Stonor and Cely letters were confiscated from their original owners; the collections as we have them today have been reconstructed from fragments dispersed throughout the Public Records. Nevertheless, neither in these nor in the Paston letters, the largest collection from the period conserved in private hands, do we find any indication that the letters were archived separately to the accounts, receipts and poems which form the remainder of the collection. None of the letters are gathered together into quires.³⁰ With the exception of the Cely letters, which appear to have been catalogued by the lawyers who impounded them, none of the correspondence bear marks suggestive of systematic organisation into files or bundles.³¹

²⁷J. Montgomery Taherne, ed., *Stradling Correspondence* (London, 1854), p. 253. For examples of letters structured in 'medieval' fashion, see the section which follows.

²⁸Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*, pp. 31-34.

²⁹W. A. Pantin, 'English Monastic Letter-Books', in J.G. Edwards, V.H. Galbraith and E.F. Jacob, ed., *Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait* (Manchester, 1933), pp. 201-23 at pp. 201-02.

³⁰*PL*:I, pp. xxxi-xxxv; *SL*, pp. 64-66.

³¹*CL*, pp. ix-x.

In the sixteenth century, by contrast, we begin to find letters compiled by contemporaries as a class or genre, in registers which may be described as 'letter-books' in the narrow sense. As a result of the bankruptcy of the family wool company, a large collection of the documents of the Johnson family have been preserved among the Public Records. In contrast to the Cely letters, however, the Johnson correspondence shows clear signs of archiving; in this process letters seem to have been firmly distinguished from documents of other types. The accounts of the company are bound in a series ledgers. The letters, on the other hand, were copied into a series of books.³² By the second half of the century many other collections show signs of archiving, suggesting an idea of the letter as a genre distinct from accounts and memoranda on the one hand, and from verse epistles on the other. The Stradling Correspondence, which dates from the Elizabethan period, survives as a series of transcriptions copied into a single folio by a contemporary hand.³³ In the early seventeenth century the archives of the Cliffords and Plumpton were also organised in this fashion, into carefully compiled Letter Books.³⁴

What might be the cause of these changes? One obvious source must be the arrival of humanist pedagogy in England. The definition of letters offered by humanist theorists was, in fact, comparatively conservative: most writers offered substantial restatements of the ideas of the *dictatores* that letters were 'sermo absentis ad absentem'.³⁵ Many writers were also broadly in agreement with the verdict of their predecessors that letters could cover a wide variety of topics and could be composed in many different styles.³⁶ In two areas,

³²Barbara Winchester, *Tudor Family Portrait* (London, 1955), pp. 233-34.

³³Traherne, ed., *Stradling Correspondence*, p. ix.

³⁴R. W. Hoyle, ed., 'Letters of the Cliffords, lords Clifford and earls of Cumberland, c. 1500-c.1565', *Camden Miscellany* 31, Camden Society 4th series 44 (1992), pp. 1-191 at p. 11; Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, pp. 18-22.

³⁵Christopher Hegendorff and Juan Luis Vives in Lippi Brandolini, ed., *De ratione scribendi libri tres* (Basle, 1549), pp. 278 and 398.

³⁶Vives argued that almost anything which bore a salutation could be called a letter. J. L. Vives, *De Conscribendis Epistolis*, ed. and trans. Charles Fantazzi (Leiden, 1989), p. 27. Some writers advocated the reduction of the letter-genre to correspond simply with the concept of the 'familiar letter' written in Antiquity. However this move was resisted by writers such as Erasmus, who wished to safeguard the function of the letter as a form of public discourse. The attempt to equate all letters with 'familiar' letters appears moreover to have exercised a comparatively limited influence on English letter-writers in the sixteenth century. For a useful

however, the efforts of humanist epistolographers do seem to have had the effect of defining the idea letters more closely. The first area in which humanism was important concerns style.

As we shall see in greater detail below, the aim of most humanist epistolographers was to revive the letter-writing style of classical authors such as Pliny and Quintilian. The precepts of *dictamen* had been based on classical oratorical theory, yet when the letter-collections of the ancients were scrutinised, scholars realised that these texts were based on different, more flexible principles. Though writers such as Erasmus were eager that these 'classical' letter-writing precepts should not be confined to 'familiar' letters, in practice it was only 'ordinary' correspondence (what we would now think of as private correspondence) which was influenced by these new conventions. The persistence of rigid 'dictaminal' conventions in quasi-legal documents such as letters close and petitions was almost certainly the product of conservatism rather than of ideology.³⁷ It nevertheless created a clear line of demarcation between ordinary vernacular letters and the 'litterae' produced at Chancery which had not existed earlier.

A second area in which humanist influence can be traced is not related directly to epistolary theory. In its impact on the position of letters within the wider framework of prose composition, however, it may perhaps have been still more influential than this body of writing. As we saw above, in the medieval period letter-writing theory had been the dominant body of teaching on prose composition; little guidance was offered on how to compose texts of other kinds. However, the revival of interest in classical rhetoric, and the rediscovery of texts such as Cicero's *De Rhetorica* during the Renaissance, supplied a new body of theory on genres other than letters. The impact of these new ideas in sixteenth-century England can clearly be seen in Roger Ascham's *The Schole Master*. In this text, rather than dividing the 'genus dicendi' into prose and poetry as many *dictatores* had done, the author outlines the categories 'poeticum', 'historicum', 'philosophicum' and 'oratoricum', each of which is further subdivided into genres such as 'comicum' and 'epicum'.³⁸ As other

discussion see Judith Rice Henderson, 'Defining the Genre of the Letter: Juan Luis Vives' *De Conscribendis Epistolis*', *Renaissance and Reformation* n.s. 7 (1983): 89-105. See also discussion in chapter 5 and below pp. 46, 55, 87.

³⁷ See below pp. 72, 85.

³⁸ 'The Schole Master', in James Bennet ed., *The English Works of Roger Ascham* (London, 1751), pp. 189-347 at p. 320-22. See also Rosalie L. Colie, *The Resources of Kind. Genre-Theory in the Renaissance* ed. Barbara

genres acquired their own theory, the importance of letters inevitably receded; now required to serve fewer functions, letters indirectly acquired a narrower scope as a genre.

Humanism appears to have an impact on the way in which even ordinary letters perceived correspondence. However, factors of a more pragmatic nature may have been just as important in the establishment of letters as a distinct genre in the minds of ordinary writers. For much of the Middle Ages the lack of distinction between letters and other documents seems partly to reflect the fact that so much writing served the needs of royal or ecclesiastical chanceries. By the later medieval period, however, writing ability was growing rapidly among laymen.³⁹ By the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries writing was becoming essential to the management of even quite modest households.⁴⁰ One corollary of this increase in literacy levels was a growing sophistication in the management of documents.⁴¹ A second was the invention of new documentary forms, or the more precise codification of those which already existed. One such development was the introduction of printed newsheets and newsbooks.⁴² This reduced the reliance on the circulation of official letters as a source of news and propaganda. More important still, however, was the emergence of precise instruments for the performance of commercial transactions. 'Bills' written by fifteenth-century merchants to note the receipt of money, or to promise delivery of goods, are simply letters with witnessing clauses or some conventional mark of authentication, such as a seal or a sign manual. By the sixteenth century 'invoices', 'quittances' and 'obligations' had developed into documents which had both their own names

K. Lewalski (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1973), pp. 4-5.

³⁹See further discussion below.

⁴⁰As we shall see below, it seems that by this period it was considered advantageous for a 'huswyf' to be able to write, simply in order to be able to manage household affairs.

⁴¹Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century letters show evidence of rather more consistent archiving than those of the fifteenth century. In addition to the practice of transcribing letters into registers, described above, letters are now often endorsed with the date of receipt and the identity of the writer. See Arthur Searle, ed., *Barrington Family Letters, 1628-1632*, Camden Society 4th Series 28 (1983), pp. 22-23; *NBL*:I, pp. xix-xx.

⁴²These are frequently mentioned in *NBL*, Searle, ed., *Barrington Family Letters* and Bertram Schofield, ed., *The Knyvett Letters (1620-1644)*, Norfolk Record Society 20 (1949).

and their own distinct diplomatic.⁴³ In the literary sphere the 'rediscovery' of classical genres such as 'epic' gave writers a greater choice of forms in which to express their themes, thereby indirectly reducing letters to a smaller more closely defined category of writing. In the bureaucratic sphere the same process occurs; the development of new instruments reduced the use of the letter as a catch-all category, tending to promote its development as a distinct genre.

Composition

A second area of English vernacular letter-writing practice of which our knowledge is deficient is composition. One area which would repay further investigation is the concept of authorship held by ordinary correspondents. A second area which requires further elucidation is the attitude held by correspondents towards the written, as opposed to the spoken word; did this change over the course of the period? However, the main aim of this chapter is to rectify the more glaring lacunae in current scholarship. The primary focus of the following discussion will therefore be rather more fundamental in character. Here we will ask simply: how did English vernacular writers learn to compose letters? How did this process change over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries?

i. The Fifteenth Century

For much of the medieval period the nature of letter-writing theory, and its means of dissemination, are in fact well understood. Scholars are broadly agreed that the *ars dictaminis* or 'theory of writing letters in prose' was first formulated in Italy, some time in the eleventh century.⁴⁴ Though teaching on letter-writing quickly diverged into a number of competing schools, most exponents of this new art concurred on two points. First, a letter,

⁴³*OED*, receipt (n 4c) and invoice (n). The earliest reference for the former is 1602, for the latter 1560. Models for obligations and quittances are offered in works aimed at sixteenth-century merchants: R.C. Alston, ed., *A Very Profitable Book to Learn English and Spanish, 1554* (Facsimile Edition; Menston, 1971) and Gabriel Murier, *Familiare Communications No Leasse Proppre then Verie Proffyttable to the Inglishe Nation desirous and nedinge the Frenche Language* (Anvers, 1563).

⁴⁴Murphy argues that the *ars dictaminis* originated with Alberic of Monte Cassino, a Benedictine monk, in a treatise of 1087: James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1972), Chapter V. Patt argues for a longer pedigree and more gradual evolution, 'The Early 'Ars Dictaminis' as Response to a Changing Society'.

like an oration, should be divided into five parts; salutation, exordium (or expression of good will to the writer), narration, petition and conclusion. Second, the most important consideration in writing a letter was the relationship between the writer and the addressee; most treatise-writers offer a more extended treatment of the salutation than of any other part of the letter. By the late twelfth century a number of treatises, both Italian and French, were already circulating in England. By the thirteenth, native English authors were making their own contribution to this body of doctrine, and the Chancery had begun to produce some of its documents in conformity with some of the more detailed stylistic precepts of the art.⁴⁵ From the fourteenth century, when writing was becoming a prerequisite of secular as well as ecclesiastical administration, letter-writing was taught as part of the curriculum at some English grammar schools.⁴⁶ Statutes of the University of Oxford show that from the same period students intending to enter service were being taught to write letters in French, alongside other 'business' subjects such as drawing accounts.⁴⁷ In the fifteenth century, however, evidence for letter-writing begins to peter out. *Dictamen* continued to form a part of an education in Latin at both university and school level.⁴⁸ However, 'business' courses, which would be the obvious sources of English pedagogy, appear to have lost popularity at this time. In the words of H. G. Richardson:

The dictatores and the teaching of dictamen and conveyancing appear to have died out in Oxford, with the grammar masters, in the latter part of the fifteenth century.⁴⁹

Davis states that no letter-writing treatises in English have been discovered for the fifteenth century.⁵⁰ There is therefore neither institutional nor treatise evidence to show how letter-

⁴⁵Martin Camargo, *Medieval Rhetorics of Prose Composition: Five English Artes Dictandi and their Tradition* (New York, 1995). For a list of *dictaminal* manuscripts in England see the appendix to Noel Denholm-Young, 'The Cursus in England', in *Collected Papers of N. Denholm-Young* (Cardiff, 1969), pp. 42-73.

⁴⁶Nicholas Orme, *English Schools in the Middle Ages* (London, 1973), p. 70.

⁴⁷H. G. Richardson, 'Business Training in Medieval Oxford', *American Historical Review* 46 (1941):259-80 and H. G. Richardson, 'Letters of the Oxford Dictatores'.

⁴⁸Orme, *English Schools*, pp. 77-78.

⁴⁹H. G. Richardson, 'Letters of the Oxford Dictatores', p. 342.

⁵⁰Norman Davis, 'The Littera Troili and English Letters', *Review of English Studies* 16 (1965):233-43 at pp. 240-41.

writing was taught in English in the fifteenth century.⁵¹

How then did the growing number of correspondents writing in English in the fifteenth century acquire their knowledge of letter-writing forms? Two scholars have hitherto addressed this question in some detail. The answers which they have proposed are so different, however, that both cannot be admitted as correct. Based on close analysis of the Paston collection, Norman Davis has argued that English letter-writing conventions cannot have the colloquial origins suggested by many writers.⁵² The prose in the body of the letters suggests that correspondents received some kind of formal training in literacy.⁵³ The more formulaic elements, such as openings and conclusions, suggest that English manuals 'must have existed'.⁵⁴ Malcolm Richardson takes a very different view. For him, the 'breezy indifference' with which vernacular writer treat the salutation suggests that 'little relationship exists between the prescriptions of the theorists of *dictamen* and what appears in the English vernacular letters under examination'.⁵⁵ In Richardson's view, the main influence on English letter-writers was not the Latin dictaminal tradition but instead the contact which they had with royal letters and with 'the sizeable legal training district that had grown up around the Chancery headquarters and Inns of Court in the western suburbs of London'.⁵⁶ The management of prose within letters, which does not always adhere to the formal patterns of royal correspondence, does not indicate that an alternative body of theory existed in the vernacular. Rather, he argues, English letter-writing was determined by a

⁵¹The first published manual was William Fulwood, *The Enemie of Idlennesse* (London, 1568). See further below.

⁵²'And all this is written in a kind of loosely constructed idiomatic English which certainly suggests that the Lady is writing pretty much as she talked.' Edith Rickert, 'Some English Personal Letters of 1402', *Review of English Studies* 31 (1932): 257-63 at p. 258.

⁵³Davis, Norman. 'Style and Stereotype in Early English Letters' *Leeds Studies in English* n.s. 1 (1967):7-17.

⁵⁴Davis, 'The Littera Troili and English Letters'.

⁵⁵Malcolm Richardson, 'Medieval English Vernacular Correspondence: Notes towards an Alternative Rhetoric', *Allegorica* 10 (1989):95-118 at p. 101.

⁵⁶Richardson, 'Medieval English Vernacular Correspondence', p. 99. The suggestion that Chancery replaced Oxford as a centre of training is anticipated in H.G. Richardson, 'Letters of the Oxford Dictatores', pp. 342-43 and Orme, *English Schools*, p. 77.

native tradition based on ‘common logic and expediency’ which continues with little interruption from the Anglo-Saxon period to modern times.

How can we begin to assess the merits of these two competing theories? The obvious first step is to re-examine Davis’s assumption (accepted by Richardson and most other contemporary writers) that no epistolary treatises survive from the fifteenth century. Since the publication of Davis’s seminal article of 1965 some fragments of epistolary pedagogy in English have, in fact, come to light. The most interesting of these is a document which has hitherto gone entirely unnoticed. This text, an English treatise with illustrative examples, is bound into the Act Book of Nostell Priory in West Yorkshire. It begins as follows:

This breek exemplary is to the erudicion of men which be easely letterd/
intendyng to be in service to knawe the ordir & forme of wrytyng from euery
degree unto other ...⁵⁷

In its declared intention to instruct ‘men .. intendyng to be in service’ this late fifteenth-century treatise follows directly in the footsteps of the Anglo-Norman treatises of the ‘Oxford dictatores’. The other clear example of English epistolary theory preserved from this period also suggests some continuity with letter-writing practices of the fourteenth century. Harvard Law Library MS 43 contains a Latin *dictaminal* treatise which includes a small section of English letters and salutations. Short English letters have been found in other fifteenth-century manuscripts, but these seem to have functioned merely as ‘*varia*’, or texts for translation into Latin.⁵⁸ However, the letters in the Harvard manuscript are more complex. They not only contain rhetorical labels, but also provide the reader with alternative modes of expression. The letter ‘Ad patrem & matrem’ begins, for example:

Worchipfull and reverenteful fadere and modere, wt lowly subieccion and
seruise, mekely I comende me to youre worthy reuerence (ECCE
SALUTACIO), desyryng hertyly to knowe of þe good hele & prosperite of
youre sowl and body (VEL) of yow or yores (VEL) of yow & alle yowres,

⁵⁷Leeds, West Yorkshire Archice Service, NP C1/1/1; f. 140. I would like to thank Matthew Holford for drawing this document to my attention,

⁵⁸William Nelson, ed., *A Fifteenth-Century School Book from a Manuscript in the British Museum (MS Arundel 249)* (Oxford, 1956), pp. 66-73. Two other examples which I have identified myself may also fall into this category. See Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 95, f. 38v; Cambridge, Trinity College MS. O.2.53 (1157), f. 45v.

welwillyng the which I prey IHU ful of myght kepe wt encrease of honour & vertu (VEL) of worchip & vertu (VEL) of vertuous lyf long duryng ...⁵⁹

This clearly suggests that the letter was intended not as an exercise in translation, but as a flexible model for the composition of letters in the vernacular.

These two pieces of evidence are extremely interesting. They do not, however, form an adequate basis on which to base general conclusions about English epistolary pedagogy in this period. The first, and more obvious reason for taking this view, is their rarity. Latin and Anglo-Norman treatises survive in significant numbers. The survival of only two English treatises may be the product of chance, but it may also point to important changes in the way in which letter-writing precepts were delivered. A second reason for taking this cautious view is based by contextual evidence. In the fourteenth century most letters do seem to have been penned either by clerics, or by the type of 'writing professionals' addressed in the Nostell Priory treatise.⁶⁰ By the fifteenth century, however, a significant proportion of letters were penned by authors in their own right.⁶¹ Though some of these were gentlemen, who undoubtedly had a knowledge of Anglo-Norman and Latin, others were of meaner standing.⁶² We cannot be confident that writers such as Thomas Henham, a wool merchant's apprentice, had the level of attainment in Latin needed to use a treatise such as that found in Harvard Law Library 43.⁶³ The way in which the majority of writers

⁵⁹Linda Ehram Voigts, 'A Letter from a Middle English Dictaminal Formulary in Harvard Law Library MS 43', *Speculum* 56 (1981):575-81 at p. 580.

⁶⁰John Taylor, 'Letters and Letter Collections in England 1300-1420', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 24 (1980): 57-70, p. 69; L.B. Dibden, 'Secretaries in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries', *English Historical Review* 25 (1910):430-44.

⁶¹The writing evidence in the Plumpton is effaced by their survival in the form of a seventeenth-century transcription. The Stonor letters have also only been partially scrutinised for evidence of autography. However, the shift towards personal authorship is clear in the Paston Letters. Though Hanham does not explicitly state how the letters in the Cely collection were composed, the fact of their autograph status is assumed in her discussion of their language. It is also evident from the consistency of spelling in letters by particular correspondents. *PL:I*, p. xxxvi; *CL*, pp. xxi-xxvii.

⁶²Three of the sons of William Paston went to Cambridge, and others are known to have been educated at Eton College and at the Inns of Law. Less is known of the education of the Stonor family, though Edmund de Stonor's son was clearly attending a boarding school in the fourteenth century. H.S. Bennett, *The Pastons and their England* (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 102-05; *SL*, p. 46 and No. 30, p. 109.

⁶³*SL*, Nos. 163, 222, 225, 251. The same seems likely to be true of many of the writers in the Cely collection, and also of the humbler writers in *SC1*.

learned letter-writing precepts in the vernacular can, therefore, only be established through detailed examination of surviving letter texts. Based on this evidence, how convincing is Richardson's argument that Chancery, and the conventions of royal letters, are the dominant influence on vernacular writers? Conversely, how sustainable is Davis's suggestion that an independent letter-writing pedagogy existed in English in the fifteenth century?

The obvious place to begin such an exploration is with the first part of letters, salutations. This aspect of letter-writing not only attracts the greatest attention in dictaminal treatises, but is also that which has been considered in greatest depth by our secondary critics. As we have seen, Richardson believes that the salutations of English letters show writers either imitating royal style, or following fairly random conventions, based on pragmatism. Davis, on the other hand, has suggested that English salutations are quite standard in form, and must therefore derive from Anglo-Norman precepts. My own scrutiny of the evidence suggests that neither of these theories is, in fact, wholly sustainable, if letters are considered as a chronological sequence. At the beginning of the fifteenth century many writers do use formulae such as 'Dear and welbelouyd frende', 'My velebeloued cousin' or 'Dere housbond', which bear a close resemblance to the salutations 'Dear and welbeloved friend' and 'Trusty and welbeloved cousin' which are routinely used by English kings all through the century.⁶⁴ There are important differences, however, between the formulae used in royal letters and those which appear in private correspondence. First, in the royal context the epithet 'dear' seems only to be applied to women after the second decade of the century. In 'private' correspondence, by contrast, it is applied to addressees of both sexes.⁶⁵

Second, even in quite early English letters, two types of salutation appear which cannot be derived from royal letters. As Davis has noted, letters exchanged by parents and children contain quite standardised elements referring to the granting of 'a daily blessing'. A letter from a daughter to her mother of 1459 begins, for example:

Right worshipfull and my most entirely beloude moder, in the most louly maner
I recommaund me vnto youre gode moderhode, besekeyng you dayly and

⁶⁴Carpenter, ed., *Armbrugh Papers*, pp. 89 and 94; *PL*:I, No. 13, p. 26.

⁶⁵Cecil Monro, ed., *Letters of Margaret of Anjou*, Camden Society o.s. 86 (1863). See Appendix 1 for further discussion of this and following points.

nyghtly of your moderly blissing.⁶⁶

As Davis himself shows, this type of familial salutation is anticipated in Anglo-Norman letter-writing.⁶⁷ The second deviation from royal protocol in ordinary vernacular letters cannot find its source in the works of teachers such as Sampson, however. From the early years of the century some writers describe the addressee not by epithets such as 'beloved' which refer to their 'emotional' attitude towards them, but rather by 'objective' status terms. In 1425, for example, William Paston wrote a letter to a lawyer beginning 'Right worthy and worshepefull ser'.⁶⁸ In 1428 Joan Armbrugh saluted Ellen Lady Ferrer 'My righth [sic] worschipfull and graciouse lady'.⁶⁹ As the century progresses this formula not only become more widespread, but also evidences a consistent pattern of change in use. From 1450 onwards the terms 'worthy' and 'reverent' become increasingly rare, and by the end of the century have virtually fallen into disuse. After 1475 the two remaining status epithets, which had earlier been used interchangeably, are applied with consistency and precision; gentlemen are now usually addressed as 'Right *worshipful* sir', while nobles are typically greeted 'Right *honourable* lord'. Though there may be some proximate legal source for these changes, these formulae cannot derive from royal letters, which adhere to the formula 'Trusty and welbeloved' throughout the century.⁷⁰ The degree of coordination in the change from one set of conventions to another clearly suggests the existence of a body of letter-writing theory in English.⁷¹

⁶⁶PL:I, No. 121, p. 206.

⁶⁷Davis, 'Litera Troili', p. 24; Richardson, 'Letters of the Oxford Dictatores', pp. 374-5, 391 *inter alia*.

⁶⁸PL:I, No. 2, pp. 2-4 at p. 2.

⁶⁹Carpenter, ed., *Armbrugh Papers*, p. 92.

⁷⁰It seems likely that these new conventions are connected to the new rigour in defining grades within the aristocracy seen in legal documents in the later Middle Ages. (See for example D. A. L. Morgan, 'The Individual Style of the English Gentleman', ed., M. Jones, ed., *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Later Medieval England* (Gloucester, 1986), pp. 15-35; Peter Coss, 'Knights, Esquires and the Origins of Social Gradation in England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series 5 (1995):155-78.) Even if this is the origin of the new practice is legal, however, the speed and consistency with which the new divisions are adopted in English suggests a *method of diffusion through some kind of taught theory or set of conventions*.

⁷¹The conclusions of the letters are equally suggestive. Most ordinary vernacular letters end with a blessing, often combined with a phrase such as 'I can no more' or 'No more at this time'. In royal letters this formula never appears; rather, these documents usually conclude with a clause of attestation 'Given under the seal...'. In the letters of aristocrats, and of lawyers who are likely to have acquired their knowledge of letters at Chancery, the

The other category of analysis which is useful in assessing the theories of Davis and Richardson is structure. The organisation of letters into a fivefold structure is consistently advocated in Latin dictaminal manuals.⁷² Perhaps following these precepts, royal missives are organised according to very strict and predictable divisions.⁷³ In the Anglo-Norman treatise tradition, on the other hand, a more flexible approach is advocated. Thomas Sampson, a dictator active in Oxford in the second half of the fourteenth century, suggests that a letter should contain five clauses ‘pour la greinder partie’, but sometime ‘vous ne metterez plus que quatre clauses et a la fois trois & aucune fois que deux...’⁷⁴ The treatment of the narration, or main text of the message is equally pragmatic:

Et la narracion vous pourrez faire en beaucoup de manieres ... il pourra avenir que y sont en la narracion plusieurs matieres et si sera la principale matiere primierment mise & puis apres les autres ensuians ...⁷⁵

Which set of conventions seems to be most influential in English letters? In fact, as Richardson has noted, a significant number of letters written in the vernacular do follow a structure which closely resembles that found in letters written at Chancery. Correspondents whose letters are most likely to take this form are members of the aristocracy. In 1480, for example, the Earl of Northumberland writes to Robert Plumpton:

[salutation] Right welbeloued frinde, **[exordium]** I greet you well. **[narration]**
And wheras the Scotts in great number are entred into Northumberland, whose

usual conclusion is ‘Written at [place] the x day of y’. The formula ‘No more to you at this time’ does not appear to have a direct precedent in Anglo-Norman pedagogy. It does, however, appear in the letter which we have already quoted in Harvard Law Library MS 43 (‘No more at þis tyme, but god þt mad al of nothyng brynge yowe to þe blesse þt is ever lastyng’). There also seems to be a general trend away from ‘I can no more’, towards ‘No more to you at this time’ over the course of the century, which suggests the influence of English precepts.

⁷²Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, pp. 194-268; Camargo, *Medieval Rhetorics of Prose Composition*, *passim*.

⁷³Hall, *A Formula Book of English Official Historical Documents and Studies in English Historical Documents*. For royal letters see examples in the gentry collections; in *ACE*; Monro, ed., *Letters of Margaret of Anjou*; and *HB*.

⁷⁴BL, MS Harley 3988, f. 28r.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, ff. 30r-30v.

malice, with Gods helpe, I entend to resist; [petition] therefore on the king owr soueraigne lords behalfe, I charg you...be with me at Topliffe vppon Munday by viij a clocke, as my trust is in you. [conclusion] Written in Wresill the vij day of September.⁷⁶

Yet other, less socially elevated writers also adopt this model. Around 1433, for example, Robert Armburgh writes to unknown addressees as follows:

[salutation] Dere frendys [exordium] I gret yow well. [narration] Ffor asmoche as there schal ben *anisi prius* [sic] at Covyntre a Twysday next after Seynt Hillary betwene Raff Hastynges knyght and vs...[petition] where ffor I wol that yff Arblaster come sende to yow, that ye delyueryn hym xxvj s. viij d. and this schal ben your discharge. [conclusion] I wretyn at Westmynster the xvij day of Desembyr the xij yere off the kyng that nowys.⁷⁷

Yet however common this formal model, the majority do not in fact follow the rigid model seen in the letters produced at Chancery. Close scrutiny reveals that, rather than following the random dictates of pragmatism, even the most apparently 'disorganised' or 'badly written' follow certain patterns or conventions. One feature shared by a substantial number of writers is the habit of beginning each new topic with an apostrophy to the addressee; such as 'Alsoy sir', 'And Sir', and 'Furdermore, Sir'.⁷⁸ The second technique, which is perhaps more strongly suggestive of learnt precept, is for writers to repeat a set phrase, often that used by that writer to introduce the 'narratio'. Here again writers tend to use the same phrase in all their letters. For example, Thomas Henham, apprentice to Sir William Stonor, links all his letter with the phrase 'Fordermore, Syr, yeff yt plesse your maystership for to understonde'.⁷⁹ A letter written to Sir William Plumpton by Thomas Billop repeatedly uses the phrase 'Letting you witt that'.⁸⁰ Joyce Parmenter shows slightly greater variety in using a similar phrase:

⁷⁶Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 32, pp. 55-56.

⁷⁷Carpenter, ed, *Armburgh Papers*, p. 145.

⁷⁸Correspondents who organise their letters with phrases of this kind include Goddard Oxbridge, John Croke, John Dalton, William Cely and William Elleson, Dame Isabel Plumpton. *SL*, Nos. 164-65, 167, 213, 183; *CL*, Nos. 18, 28, 44, 49, 51, 162, 164, 182, 198, 201-18; *PL*, Nos. 129-30; Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, Nos. 199-200, 212-13, 215, 218.

⁷⁹*SL*, Nos. 163, 222, 225.

⁸⁰Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 17, pp. 41-42.

Ryghte worshipfull maystir, I recommand me vnto yow, *lattyng yow wyt* þat I have reseuyd ij lettyrys þat cam frome yow... *Lattyng yow wyt* þat your woll and fell are in good savete ... *Doyng yow to wyt* þat þer be no Holanderys come vnto þe day þat þys byll was mayd, and þan þer cam one cartt. *Also I latt yow wyt* þat your brodir Dalton hathe sold xj sarplerys of woll to a man off Brggys [sic]...⁸¹

As with the pattern in salutations, the broad standardisation in these ‘informal’ structuring techniques implies the existence of taught precepts. It suggests pragmatic guidelines, on the model of those offered by Sampson in Anglo-Norman, had been formulated in English for the use of ordinary writers.

The final evidence that letter-writing precepts were not learned at Chancery by all, or perhaps even the majority of writers, lies in the graphic and orthographic competence of writers in this period. Despite the absence of direct evidence, it is at least conceivable that the masters at Chancery might have taught their pupils more informal letter-writing tropes, alongside the formal conventions which they used to construct royal missives in their own professional lives. It seems highly unlikely, however, that writers who underwent such a programme of education, however informally, would have left without the ability to write in a good, clear script. Equally, although not all students could be expected to adopt the emergent Chancery standard, we would also expect the graduates of such an education to spell in a manner which shows evidence of learnt conventions.⁸² When we look at the evidence of surviving letters, however, it is clear that familiarity with epistolary conventions, even of the most orthodox kind, did not necessarily go hand in hand with such advanced writing skills. [Plate 1] Goddard Oxbridge, an apprentice in the wool trade has, in the past, been cited as an example of a writer of notably mean ability.⁸³ Yet his letters begin and end with the standard formulae which we described above. Richard Cely the elder is perhaps one of the least accomplished of all writers whose letters have survived in his family’s collection. Yet this writer seems to have been able, when he chose, to produce letters structured in

⁸¹*CL*, No. 142, pp. 129-30.

⁸²For a definition and discussion of the concept of the Chancery Standard see chapter three below, pp. 193-4

⁸³‘These four letters are expressed in the idiom of the unlettered or at least are the work of one whose schooling had been imperfect.’ J. W. Adamson, ‘The Extent of Literacy and Illiteracy in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries: Notes and Conjectures’, *The Library* 10 (1929):163-93 at p. 164.

highly orthodox fashion. In 1479 he writes, for example:

I grete you wyll. I lete you wyte I haue resayuyd of John Forner and Hary Demorys for the full payment of Phelepe Seller ys letter of payment, werefor I wyll that 3e delyuer to the sayd John or Hary, the bryngar of thys byll, the plege of Harys the weche Phelype Seller lefete wyt you at Caleys. Wryt at London the x day of Desembor.⁸⁴

Many other examples could be cited.⁸⁵

Letter-writing conventions were, therefore, both standard and widely disseminated in fifteenth-century England. The difference between fifteenth-century English salutations and those found in Anglo-Norman treatises suggests that the latter cannot be the direct source of this standardisation. Yet Chancery also seems unlikely to have exercised a direct influence on many letter-writers in this period. The evidence therefore points towards the existence of some kind of systematic training in letter composition in English. Why, then, have so few treatises survived? In fact, when taken with the basic writing ability of many correspondents, the very sparsity of survival may itself be important evidence of the nature of letter-writing pedagogy in the vernacular. Like the treatise in Nostell Priory Act Book, the records which we find in Oxford in the fourteenth century have survived for one principal reason: these manuscripts, and the ordinances which describe their use, were produced in an institutional, and thus well-recorded context. In the case of the Oxford manuscripts, the reason for this position is not random; the pedagogy which they describe is an aspect of linguistic tuition, and thus forms part of a sophisticated and so closely regulated curriculum. With the transition to English, I would suggest that letter-writing came to assume a very different position in the pedagogic hierarchy. In a fictional dialogue of 1603 a yeoman portrays letter-writing not as an elevated accomplishment, but rather as one of the most basic elements of literacy:

This is all we go to school for: to read common prayers at church and set down common prices at market, write a letter and make a bond ... These are the chief matters that we meddle with and we find enough to trouble our heads withal.⁸⁶

⁸⁴*CL*, No. 79, p. 70.

⁸⁵See *inter alia*, Richard Cely the elder and the younger, William Cely, John Dalton, Thomas Henham, Robert More and John Shrynner. *CL*, Nos. 23-27, 36-38, 117-122, 204-18, 140-41, 150, 157 *inter alia*, *SL*, Nos. 163, 188, 222, 225, 251, 299-301.

⁸⁶Nicholas Breton, *The Court and the Country* (London, 1618) quoted in David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social*

This observation seems to find support in our own period. As we have seen, individuals whose graphic ability is poor, and who have not learnt the spelling systems which characterise more educated writers, nevertheless show a firm grasp of basic epistolary conventions.⁸⁷ If this evidence is accurate, and letters were taught at a very elementary level, as an exercise in basic literacy, then the lacuna in the records is readily explicable. From the pioneering research of J. W. Adamson onwards, historians have noted that reconstruction of tuition in reading and writing is rendered difficult by its informal, non-institutional character.⁸⁸ In a recent article, for example, Caroline Baron has outlined the problems of describing the kind of training in literacy open to girls:

Most boys and girls would have gone to the small informal schools, later known as 'dame' schools, of which we occasionally catch glimpses in the records. But they were not of interest to the ecclesiastical authorities, nor to the mayor and aldermen; their proprietors did not form a craft guild, and so they have left only brief traces in the records.⁸⁹

Further research will almost certainly reveal more English dictaminal material in 'informal' contexts, such as commonplace books. I would suggest, however, that it is precisely because letter-writing was such a 'fundamental' or 'foundational' subject by the fifteenth century, that so little evidence of its teaching has survived.

ii. The Sixteenth Century

In the fifteenth century, the factor which makes it difficult to understand the use and

Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England (Cambridge, 1980), p. 10.

⁸⁷In this period, though spelling had not become standard, it operated within certain constraints. In practice it is therefore possible to distinguish between trained and untrained writers. For fuller discussion see J. A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre, eds., *A Book of Middle English* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 5-9 and Norman Davis, 'Notes on Grammar and Spelling in the Fifteenth Century', in Douglas Gray, ed., *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose* (Oxford and New York, 1985), pp. 493-509.

⁸⁸Adamson, 'Extent of Literacy and Illiteracy in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries', *passim*. This article presents a helpful overview of the ways in which ordinary individuals learned to write in the period. Two routes seem to be most common; education in a 'pettie school', that is in a class which formed an informal adjunct to the grammar schools, or at the feet of a parish priest or a deputy appointed in his place.

⁸⁹Caroline M. Barron, 'The Education and Training of Girls in Fifteenth-Century London', in D. E. S. Dunn, ed., *Courts, Counties and the Capital in the Later Middle Ages* (Stroud, 1996), pp. 139-53 at p. 147

acquisition of letter-writing precepts is the absence of pedagogic material. In the sixteenth century the situation is very different; for this period English letter-writing manuals exist in some number.⁹⁰ Commentators have understood these as providing us with very full understanding of letter-writing theory in the sixteenth century; the commercial success of these manuals would seem to support this conclusion.⁹¹ I would suggest, however, that the influence which texts such as Angel Day's *English Secretorie* had on ordinary sixteenth-century correspondents has been overstated by past scholars.⁹² One reason for scepticism arises from a consideration of chronology. The earliest of these manuals was published in 1568, while the remainder did not appear until the final quarter of the century. Manuals can have had no impact on ordinary writers during the first three-quarters of the century.⁹³

A second reason for questioning the importance of these manuals lies in their contents. Many scholars have taken at face value the claims made by the authors that these works serve 'the unlearned' or 'unskilful'.⁹⁴ In fact, close inspection reveals these texts to be both

⁹⁰William Fulwood, *The Enimie of Idlenesse: Teaching the Manner and Stile How to Endite, Compose, and Write All Sorts of Epistles and Letters* (London, 1568); Abraham Fleming, *A Panoplie of Epistles, or, a Looking Glass for the Unlearned* (London, 1576); Angel Day, *The English Secretorie* (London, 1586); Nicholas Breton, *A Poste with a Packet of Madde Letters* (London, 1602).

⁹¹Day's *The English Secretorie* was published four times in the sixteenth century (1586, 1592, 1595, 1599). Fulwood's *Enimie of Idlenesse* also went through four editions (1568, 1578, 1582, 1585).

⁹²Jean Robertson, *The Art of Letter Writing. An Essay on the Handbooks published in England during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1942); Katherine Gee Hornbeak, *The Complete Letter Writer in English*, *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages* 15 (1934); Sanna-Kaisa Tanskanen, 'No Lesse Plesaunt than Profitable': Early Modern Letter-Writing Manuals Revisited', in M. Gustaffson, ed., *Essays and Explorations. A 'Freundschaft' for Liisa Dahl* (Turku, 1996), pp. 145-56. Writers on female letter-writing have also suggested that these manuals were useful aids to study. See Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent and Obedient: English Books for Women 1475-1640* (San Marino, 1982), pp. 25-26 and James Daybell, 'Women's Letters and Letter-Writing in England 1540-1603', *Unpublished DPhil Thesis, University of Reading* 1999, p. 59.

⁹³Perhaps the most practical models for ordinary situations available to the manual-reader were those found in Angel Day's *English Secretorie*. Yet the section of the manual which both Hornbeak and Robertson single out as the most useful for the ordinary reader, that devoted to 'Familiar Letters', did not appear until the second edition of 1595. Though closer to the style in which letters were written in the period, these models therefore can have no greater claim to have exercised a decisive influence on the development of epistolary conventions in the sixteenth century than those of Fleming or Fulwood. Hornbeak, *Complete Letter-Writer*, pp. 19 and 21; Robertson, *Art of Letter Writing*, p. 20.

⁹⁴Fleming, *Panoplie of Epistles*, Preface 'To the unlearned I doe likewise offer it, as sufficient furniture to arme and enable them against ignoraunce, the aduersarie and sworne enimie of understanding ...'; Fulwood, *Enimie of Idlenesse*, Preface, 'The cunning clarke hath small neede of a teacher. It is the unskilfull scholer that wanteth instructions. Mine onely intent therfore at this instant is to place downe such precepts and set forth such instructions, as may (in mine opinion) best serve to edifie the ignoraunt: and those not unprofitable but very

too fanciful and too complex to be of much practical use. In the preface to his *Panoplie of Epistles* Abraham Fleming boasts that his models are devised not to serve the everyday needs of the present age, but rather are:

drawne out of the most pure and clear founteines of the finest and eloquentest Rhetoricians, that have lived and flourished in all ages even from the first.⁹⁵

Unlike Fleming, Fulwood's models are not drawn entirely from classical authors such as Pliny, Cicero and Politian. Yet the influence of classical rhetoric on even the most putatively 'practical' of models is so dominant that their value as exemplars for the unlearned must surely be questioned. The model offered for sons writing to their fathers begins, for example:

Derely beloued Father, after most humble commendations unto you and my louing mother, beseching you both of your daily blessing, &c. Father, although I knowe your advise to be truer then the voyce of the *Cumaine Sibille*, or the oracle of *Apollo*, neuerthesse I thinke it my dutie to make briefe answeere unto your graue and learned Letters.⁹⁶

For the first part of the sixteenth century, as for the fifteenth, no coherent epistolary theory has survived in the vernacular. As before, our investigation of letter-writing skills and precepts, must, therefore, be based on the evidence of the texts produced by ordinary writers. Up to the middle of the century, what this investigation reveals is considerable continuity from the preceding period. As in the fifteenth century many letters, both dictated and autograph, continue to conform to the structure prescribed by the *dictatores*. In 1539, for example, George Basset wrote to his parents Lord and Lady Lisle:

[salutation] Right honorable and my moste dere and singuler goode lorde and ladye **[exordium]** in my moste humble maner I recommaunde me unto yow ... **[narration]** I certefye youe by theys my letters that my masitir and my ladye be in good helthe, to whome I am myche bownde. **[petition]** Furthermore I beseche your lordeshepe and ladeshepe to have me hertelye recommendyde unto my brothers and systers. **[conclusion]** And thus I praye Godde to conserue your lordeshepe and ladeshepe ever in goode longe and prosperus helthe with

nedful.'

⁹⁵Fleming, *Panoplie of Epistles*, Preface.

⁹⁶Fulwood, *Enimie of Idlenesse*, p. 215.

honor.⁹⁷

As in the foregoing period, many letters cover too many topics to be precisely accommodated within the prescribed fivefold structure. As before, however, letters which do not follow the rigid structures tend to use a limited number of alternative techniques to organise their material. For example, many writers follow their fifteenth-century antecedents in linking different 'narrations' with repetitive expressions such as 'Madam', or 'And also' 'And as touching'.⁹⁸ Further, almost all writers, however limited their graphic or orthographic abilities, display knowledge of correct formulae of salutation and conclusion.

[Plate 2]

The second area in which strong continuities are evident is the context of letter-writing pedagogy. In the early sixteenth century, as in the fifteenth, knowledge of epistolary conventions appears to have been acquired not as part of an advanced legal or rhetorical training, but rather as one of the first elements of tuition in literacy. One sign of this is the frequency with which standard epistolary tropes and structures are accompanied by irregular orthography. In 1542, for example, Henry Willoughby writes to his uncle using the stereotyped vocabulary of letters:

[T]hys ys to singnyfy [sic] un to you that my lord marques harte requeste ys un to you for to have aswell youre ayde, assistanse and help for the chowsynge of on of the knyghtes of the shyre of Warwyke as of your kynsfokes [sic] ...Wher in you shawle do my lord mowch frendshype and pleasure...⁹⁹

Another very striking example is a holograph letter sent by one Lionel Hamerton to the first earl of Cumberland. It begins:

After my dewte remembert, pleissz your honorable lordship to know that we do lak iern as weill for wyndoys as for your wyndleisse wherin I besech your lordschip that I may know your pleissor herin in all goodle hast after seygth heirof for it liyth of ye haste sped of your warkes.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷PRO, SP3/1/59.

⁹⁸Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, Nos. 196, 199, 212, 221, 227; Mary A. Welch, ed., 'Willoughby Letters of the First Half of the Sixteenth Century', in *Thoroton Society Record Series 24* (1967), pp. 1-98, Nos. 4, 6, 22, 23, 24.

⁹⁹Welch, ed., *Willoughby Letters*, No. 39, pp. 63-64.

¹⁰⁰Hoyle, ed., *Clifford Letters*, No. 102, p. 158. For other writers whose spelling or writing suggest lack of tuition see also Nos. 76, 77. See also the letters of Sabine Johnson, Richard and Diggory Grenville, John Harris

For this period, the perception that letter-writing was an elementary skill, closely associated with the acquisition of writing ability, is supported by two other fragments of evidence. First, a parish priest's manual dating from this period contains a unique collection of model letters. All of these letters are practical, and closely resemble those actually sent in the period, suggesting that the formulary was intended to function as guide to the writing of real letters. One of these models seems explicitly to link the acquisition of writing skills with letter-writing:

Also shewynge youe that I go vnto wrytting scole and thys byll ys off my owne hand writtyng wher off I thank Allmyghty God and my techar for his good enformacioun.¹⁰¹

The second source of evidence is more substantial. Though Thomas Sampson's treatises contain numerous model letters from students, for the fifteenth century there are no surviving examples of letters sent by young children to their parents. In the Lisle Letters, however, numerous examples can be found. Letters like that of George Basset, quoted above, show very clearly that letter-writing was taught to children at an early age, closely linked to the acquisition of writing skills.¹⁰²

Up to the middle of the sixteenth century the tropes of letter-writing, and the way in which composition was taught, remain essentially unchanged from the preceding period. From the 1530s onwards, however, a small number of letters suggest that conventions were changing in both of these areas. In 1534 Sir Thomas More wrote a letter to Thomas Cromwell which opens in traditional mode:

Right Worshipfull. After harteis recommendacion, so it is that I am enfourmed,

and the sisters of Henry VIII. Barbara Winchester, ed., 'The Johnson Letters (1542-1552)', 4 vols. (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of London, 1953): II, Nos. 124, 129, 134, 146, etc.; Muriel St-Clare Byrne, ed., *The Lisle Letters*, 6 vols. (Chicago, 1983):II, pp. 429-30; *Ibid.*,s:V, pp. 613-14; Henry Ellis, ed., *Original Letters Illustrative of English History*, 10 vols. in 3 series (London, 1824-46), 1:I, Letters XLII, XLIII, XLVI-XLIX., pp. 121-25, 128-31

¹⁰¹BL, MS Sloane 1584, ff. 29r-32v. This letter is at f. 30r.

¹⁰²See n. 97 above. George is said to have been about fourteen years old when he wrote this letter. St-Clare Byrne, ed., *Lisle Letters*, p. 100. Indeed, in the sixteenth century parents often urge children to write letters to demonstrate or to practice the proficiency of their writing. See chapter five below at pp. 261-2.

that there is a bill put in againste me into the higher house before the Lordes
¹⁰³
 ...

Yet a letter written to his daughter in the same year begins in very different fashion:

Our Lord Blisse You All. If I had not ben, my derely beloued doughter, at a firme and fast point, (I trust in God's great mercie) this good great while before, your lamentable letter had not a litle abashed me, surely farre aboue all other thynges, of which I here diuers times not a fewe terrible towarde me.¹⁰⁴

By the 1540s further examples are forthcoming. Most of the correspondents in the Johnson letters use conventional expressions of salutation, and write letters which conform to medieval ideas of structure.¹⁰⁵ The merchant brothers, Otwell and John Johnson, also affect this mode of writing for the most part. Occasionally, however, they write in a different manner. In 1551, for example, John wrote to inform a friend of Otwell's death. The letter begins:

Since my departing from you, in manner ever since it hath been (beloved) friend, the lamentablest time that ever I abode ...¹⁰⁶

Perhaps most striking of all, in their departure from dictaminial norms, are the letters which Princess Elizabeth sent to Edward VI during the period of his reign. Concerned by reports of his ill health she begins:

Like as a shipman in stormy wether plukes downe the sailes tarijnge for bettar winde, so did I, most noble Kinge ... pluk downe the hie sailes of my ioy and comfort and do trust one day that as troblesome waues have repulsed me bakwarde, so a gentil winde wil bringe me forwarde to my hauen.¹⁰⁷

Like the Johnsons and Sir Thomas More, Elizabeth does not divide letters which begin in this indirect mode into the fivefold structure prescribed by the medieval *dictatores*.

The source of these new conventions is easily identified. In the fourteenth century, some

¹⁰³Elizabeth Frances Rogers, ed., *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More* (Princeton, 1947), p. 470.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, p. 508.

¹⁰⁵The collection spans the years 1542 to 1552.

¹⁰⁶Barbara Winchester, *Tudor Family Portrait* (London, 1955), p. 271.

¹⁰⁷Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 1:II, No. CLX, pp. 145-6 at p. 145.

writers of Latin epistolary theory began to reject the precepts of the medieval *ars dictaminis*. Traditional *dictamen* had been based on Cicero's treatise on oratory *De inventione* and the pseudo-Ciceronian *Ad Herennium*. However, when Cicero's actual letters were 'rediscovered' by Petrarch in 1345, it immediately became clear that these texts were organised on quite different principles to those expounded in the treatises on oratory.¹⁰⁸ Rather than observing a fixed structure, Cicero, and other classical letter-writers such as Pliny and Quintilian, emphasised flexibility and spontaneity in letter-writing: letters were likened not to public declamations, but to familiar conversation between friends.¹⁰⁹ Humanist scholars quickly codified the rules which they inferred from these letters, thereby formulating a body of prescriptive literature which explicitly rejected many of the precepts of the *dictatores*. In his treatise *De conscribendis epistolis*, for example, Juan Luis Vives argues:

Some pedagogues, when discussing the composition of letters, elaborate an ... invention arrangement and elocution drawn from the precepts of oratory, which are obviously foreign and superfluous to this context. First of all hardly any letters contain the five parts of oratory, and this tender young maiden cannot support such artifice.¹¹⁰

Erasmus, in his second, and more comprehensive epistolary treatise, writes:

Since letters sent and received suppose an unheard conversation between the correspondents, it would be desirable to convey this impression as appositely as we can ... those customary recommendations, which are now usually tacked on at the beginning, should be omitted altogether or moved to the end of the letter.¹¹¹

At the date at which More, the Johnson brothers and Elizabeth I were writing their letters, these ideas were still quite new in England. Erasmus' influential treatise *De conscribendis*

¹⁰⁸Though this incident is still sometimes referred straightforwardly as a 'rediscovery' the letters of Cicero had, in fact, been in circulation for much of the Middle Ages. See L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (London, 1968), pp. 86, 92, 96, 105.

¹⁰⁹It should be noted, however, that some humanist writers responded to the recovery of classical writing by intensifying the epistolary debt to oratory. See chapter five below, pp. 300-1.

¹¹⁰Vives, *De conscribendis epistolis*, ed. and trans. Fantazzi, pp. 103-05.

¹¹¹Desiderius Erasmus, 'De conscribendis epistolis' ed. and trans. Charles Fantazzi in J.K.Sowards, ed., *Collected Works of Erasmus Vol 25: Literary and Educational Writings 3* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 1985), pp. 1-254 at p. 79

epistolis was published in London in 1521; manuals propounding the new conventions had yet to appear in the vernacular. This strongly suggests that this group of writers differed from their predecessors not only in the letter-writing conventions which they followed, but also in the way in which they acquired their epistolary training. Where their antecedents, and less erudite contemporaries, learned to write letters as they learned to form alphabetic characters, these four correspondents seem likely to have acquired their epistolary conventions as part of a training in Latin grammar and rhetoric. Circumstantial evidence strongly supports this conclusion. Sir Thomas More was not only an extremely erudite man, but a personal friend of Erasmus. Roger Ascham, tutor to Elizabeth, was a renowned humanist scholar. His advice 'for the private bringing up of Youth in Jentlemen and Noblemens Houses' in *The Schole Master* suggests how his pupil may have acquired her classical letter-writing style. Latin tutors are advised:

chose out some epistle *Ad Atticum*, some notable common place out of his orations, or some other part of Tullie... and translate it you [sic] your selfe, into plaine naturall English, and then give it to him [the student] to translate into *Latin* againe.¹¹²

Nothing definite is known concerning the education of the Johnson brothers. We do know, however, that John Johnson was apprenticed to Anthony Cave, an educational benefactor who endowed scholarships in Oxford and founded a grammar school at Lathbury in the 1530s. It seems likely that John and Otwell were exposed to the Ciceronian epistles either at the feet of a progressive grammar master, or perhaps in Cave's own household.¹¹³

What in 1540 had been an exceptional style, appears, by the 1570s to have become the standard mode of composition for male correspondents. Letters written in this freer style, which often begin with an indirect opening rather than a formal salutation, can be seen, for example, in the collections of the Thynne, Gawdy and Stradling families, and also in the letters of the greater aristocracy surviving from this period.¹¹⁴ By this date the manuals of

¹¹² Ascham, 'The Scholemaster' in Bennet, ed., *English Works of Roger Ascham*, p. 265.

¹¹³ Winchester, *Tudor Family Portrait*, p. 26. The teaching of letter-writing in Latin in grammar schools is discussed in Foster Watson, *The English Grammar Schools to 1660: Their Curriculum and Practice* (Cambridge, 1908), 'Letter-Writing', pp. 413-422. Unfortunately, however, Watson's evidence does not begin until the seventeenth century.

¹¹⁴ BL, Microfilm 904/5, vol. V, ff. 90, 107 and 110; BL, MS Additional 36989; Traherne, ed., *Stradling*

Fleming, Fulwood and Day had appeared, making these newer precepts available in the vernacular. Yet, the majority of writers who learned the new, more 'ambitious' style in the final quarter of the century seem likely to have done so in the same fashion as More, Edward VI and the Johnsons. As schoolboys they either came directly into contact with humanist epistolary theory, or they learned these precepts indirectly, by translating letters of writers such as Pliny or Cicero from Latin to English. For example, in the 1570s and 1580s William Camsewe wrote a series of letters in Latin to his father, informing him of his educational progress. When he later abandons Latin for English, it is unsurprising to see that his style continues to follow Erasman precepts. To his brother he writes, for example:

Yf opportunitie had sufficiently served you showde have had of me a longe and a large letter concerninge my placinge wherein I thinke my selfe to have bynne deluded: but farewell [to] hit seyng hit cannot be recovered ... ¹¹⁵

Evidence of higher education is also to be seen in the Thynne and Gawdy collections, which date from the same period.¹¹⁶

In many other cases this route of acquisition seems unlikely, however. Though the example of the Otwell brothers suggests that an education in Latin was available to men of all social degrees in the sixteenth century, scholars generally agree that ordinary women were not offered such training.¹¹⁷ Yet by the final quarter of the century we find many women, even those of comparatively modest status, writing letters in the new 'humanist' style. For example, in a draft written in her own hand in 1585, Elizabeth, the alienated wife of Sir Francis Willoughby, implores her husband:

Correspondence, passim; J. Hunter, *Hallamshire*, revised and enlarged by A. Gatty (London, 1869), pp. 113-18.

¹¹⁵PRO, SP46/71/59.

¹¹⁶John Thynne junior writes to his father asking that he 'relese me from the greke tonge' the study of which he was finding beyond his capacity. BL, Microfilm 904/1, vol. 1, f. 148. See also letters sent from university by the Gawdy sons in BL, MS Additional 36989, ff. 23-107. This also, of course, fits with the trend towards more advanced education among the lesser aristocracy traced in Lawrence Stone 'The Educational Revolution in England, 1560-1640', *Past and Present* 28 (1964): 41-80.

¹¹⁷'Gentlewomen's knowledge of Greek and Latin was generally frowned upon, since familiarity with classical literature was considered dangerous to the purity of their minds.' Norma McMullen, 'The Education of English Gentlewomen 1540-1640', *History of Education* 6 (1977):87-101 at p. 100. See also Linda Pollock, 'Teach her to live under obedience' the making of women in the upper ranks of early modern England', *Continuity and Change* 4 (1989):231-258, p. 238.

Sr: Albeit in respect of ye manifold wrongs & wantes, wch I have endured for the space of theise 7 yeares paste, I have had iuste cause as ever had any to hate, even from my very harte, all those who by their lewd & slanderous reports have bene the contryvers and contynuers thereof. Yet since it hath pleased god now at the lenghte [sic] to move yor harte to make some showe of better inclination towards me, I protest unto yow before god I do not only frely & unfaynedly forgive them, but also do most humbly thanke yow for vouchsafing me (to my greate comforte) both yor company & conference.¹¹⁸

A few years later one Gertrude Winter wrote an autograph letter of thanks to her cousin and patron, the Earl of Shrewsbury. Here an equal sophistication is evident:

Right Honorable: Your Lordships manifold and sundry favors shewed me in my greatest distresse, the frute wherof I did not only taste uppon my departure, but nowe allso at my comming into the countrey, by the possessing of my poore liuing thorough your Lordships honorable means, have embouldened me to trouble your Lordship with thes lines ...¹¹⁹

The appearance of this new style in the letters of gentlewomen and children suggests that this less formulaic, freer writing style was no longer associated exclusively with Latinity. By the final quarter of the century it seems that these new letter-writing precepts were being taught not just in the vernacular, but as part of elementary literacy.¹²⁰ One sign of this is the appearance of varied, indirect openings in the letters of graphically unaccomplished writers. When a mere eight years old, for example, Lady Anne Clifford wrote the following to her father in a careful, but clearly unpractised, hand:

I humbly intreate your blessing and euer comend my duety and saruice to your Lo: praying I maybe made happy by your loue I comend my seruice and leaue my trobling of your Lo: being your Daughter in all obedient duety.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Alice T. Friedman, 'Portrait of a Marriage: The Willoughby Letters of 1585-1586', *Signs* 11 (1986): 542-55 at p. 550.

¹¹⁹ Lambeth Palace Library, MS Talbot 3203, f. 5. No date.

¹²⁰ Though it is perhaps misleading to suggest that letters had ceased to be taught in this fashion. Though it is difficult to document, it seems likely that certain types of correspondent continued to be taught the old conventions until the new humanist tropes became simplified and codified into these new conventions.

¹²¹ George. C. Williamson, *Lady Anne Clifford: Her Life, Letters and Work* (Kendal, 1922), Plate 43. (Reproduced, plate 4, this thesis). See also, *inter alia*, Anne Townshend's letter to her father Nathaniel in *NBL:III*, pp. 279-80; Maria Thynne's letters in Alison Wall, ed., *Two Elizabethan Women : Correspondence of Joan and Maria Thynne 1575-1611*, Wiltshire Record Society 38 (1982); Lucy St John to her father Lord Burghley, BL, MS Lansdowne 104, f. 175v.

Internal evidence provides a second indication that the 'new' letter-writing conventions were being taught alongside basic skills such as writing. As we saw above, as formulated by humanist writers, the new stylistic precepts demanded variety and elegance of expression: the composition of letters in this style required a high degree of proficiency on the part of the writer. What we find in many later sixteenth-century letters, however, is a modification of these precepts. Though they do not use the same salutations as mid-century correspondents, many correspondents writing in this period use set opening formulae rather than the indirect openings prescribed by Erasmus. Several letters in the *Stradling Correspondence*, a collection which dates from the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, begin with formulae such as 'After most hartly comendacons unto you, and to my good lady yor wyfe, from me and myne. Thes shalbe to praye you ...'¹²² An equally simple, 'traditional' form of salutation is used by Jean Cecil, mother of Lord Burghley:

Good sonne, I hartely commend me unto you and to my Ladye with God his blessynge & myne unto you and to all yours, trustynge in God yow be in good health as I was at the makege hereof thanks be to God. The cause of my writinge unto you at this present tyme is ...¹²³

Another form of opening which is less medieval in tone, but which was clearly also a set, learned formula, is the following, which occurs in many variants:

I could not let this bearer passe without signifynge unto you the good health of my knight and my selfe.¹²⁴

Set expressions are also commonly found at the close of letters.¹²⁵ Like their equivalents in the fifteenth century, set phrases of this kind are found in the letters of even the least

¹²²Traherne, ed., *Stradling Correspondence*, No. CC, p. 255. See also Nos. CCXXIII-IV, pp. 284-85.

¹²³BL, MS Lansdowne 104, No. 61, f. 160v. Autograph, 1574.

¹²⁴BL, MS Additional 33,597, f. 33v. (Anne le Straunge to her father Sir William Paston.) See also 'Good Mr Thynne the continued desire that I have to hear from you will not suffer the fitness of so good a messenger as this bearer is to pass without these few lines ...' in Wall, ed., *Two Elizabethan Women*, No. 32, p. 21; 'My good brother, Having suche a convenient messenger, I could not but salute you and my good syster with these few lynes' in Traherne, ed., *Stradling Correspondence*, p. 216; 'I could not let passe this bearer without some mention of our dutye to you ...' and 'This messenger going from us I coude not chuse but salute your ladyship with two or three lines ...' in Searle, ed., *Barrington Letters*, pp. 121 and 198.

¹²⁵A common set phrase is 'And so leaving longer to troble you I byd you fare well'. *NBL*:I, pp. 171, 178 *inter alia*; *PRO*, SP 46/60, ff. 17, 19v, 21v, 23v.

accomplished writers.¹²⁶ It therefore seems reasonable to assume that, like their fifteenth-century equivalents, formulae of this kind may have been learnt by rote. As in the fifteenth century, the basic tools of letter-writing appear to have been available even to those with the most basic writing skills.¹²⁷

iii. Conclusion

In this section I have suggested a number of amendments to current views of letter-writing pedagogy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Because evidence of ‘business training’ in Oxford is sparse for the fifteenth century, it has been suggested that Chancery, and the conventions of royal letters, must have been the main influence on ordinary English letter-writers of the period. I would argue, however, that the differences between fourteenth and fifteenth century practices are rather greater in magnitude than this theory suggests. In the fourteenth century, when all letters were composed in Anglo-Norman French, epistolary pedagogy was a comparatively elite subject; students who wished to learn these skills had to travel to Oxford or to some other centre offering advanced education. Students who pursued these courses were generally those who aimed to be ‘writing professionals’ - secretaries to the aristocracy or clerks in royal government.¹²⁸ The idea that Chancery was the centre of learning in the fifteenth century presupposes that letter-writing continued to be the province of professional writers. By the mid fifteenth century, however, many correspondents wrote their own letters, rather than relying on secretaries. The consistency of the epistolary conventions used by gentlemen, merchants and even apprentices suggests that, like writing, the composition of letters was now a widely taught skill. This seems confirmed both by the inadequacy of royal letters as a model and by the survival of English

¹²⁶For example, Dorothy Gamage and Margaret Gresham, both women of the ‘middling sort’, routinely open their letters to their husbands in formulaic style ‘M. Gresham/Gamage, I hartely recomend me unto you, this is to let you understand’. PRO, SP46/58, ff. 255, 263; SP46/60, ff. 7-10., 19-23. See also Lady Newdigate-Newdegate, *Gossip from a Muniment Room* (London, 1897), p. 16-18.

¹²⁷As though to confirm this, some are found in the ‘Familiar Letters’ section of Angel Day’s 1595 edition.

¹²⁸As internal evidence suggests.

dictaminal fragments such as the Nostell Priory treatise. Following the transition to English, I believe that knowledge of letter-writing was no longer an elite skill, which required training at the feet of Chancery clerks, or an advanced education in Latin grammar. Rather, by the middle of the century, letter composition had assumed the position which it still holds today, as one of the first, and most basic accomplishments of literacy.

Scholars studying letter composition in the later medieval period have overstated the degree of continuity between the English and Anglo-Norman periods. By concentrating on Latin treatises and printed manuals rather than on the evidence of real letters, I would argue that early modern scholars have erred in the opposite direction; they have overstated differences between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Though humanist educationalists had formulated a new 'classical' epistolography by the middle of the fifteenth century, the evidence of letters shows that 'medieval' epistolary precepts continued to dominate in England up to and beyond the middle of the sixteenth century. The second half of the century does see a degree of change in letter-writing conventions. Some correspondents now write with a sophistication which speaks not only of contact with Erasmian or Ciceronian precepts, but also of advanced rhetorical training. However, the need of most correspondents was to communicate pragmatic information rather than to display their eloquence, and by the final quarter of the century a new epistolography had developed which accommodated the needs of these more modest writers. In the letters of ordinary correspondents of this period different conventions are used to those of the fifteenth century; phrases such as 'no more to you at this time' have clearly fallen out of favour. Yet, like their fifteenth-century predecessors, and in defiance of the humanist epistolographers, correspondents of this period continue to organise their letters around simple learned formulae. A similar continuity can also be seen in methods of tuition. A growing number of gentlemen now attended universities or grammar schools, where they were exposed to the sophisticated letter-writing precepts of the humanists.¹²⁹ For more modest writers, however, letter-writing was probably taught very much as it had been in the fifteenth century, either at home or in informal 'petie' or 'dame' schools. Rather than providing unprecedented access to epistolary theory, printed letter-writing manuals therefore probably served as no

¹²⁹Stone, 'Educational Revolution in England'.

more than supplementary tools in a form of popular tuition established long before their appearance.¹³⁰

Transmission

Of all the aspects of letter-writing considered in this study, the practices of transmission are those which can most confidently be reconstructed in outline. In the early Middle Ages, around the time when *dictamen* was invented, it seems fairly certain that letters, where used at all, played only a subsidiary role in the process of communication. When Ganelon bears a letter to King Marsile in the eleventh-century *Song of Roland*, for example, he is shown communicating his entire message orally before placing the sealed letter in the king's hands. Ganelon has been given Charlemagne's glove and staff to carry as emblems of his authority, and thus the letter occupies only a secondary place even as symbolic object in this transaction.¹³¹ By the end of our period, practices had changed quite radically. Nicholas Breton's *A Poste with a Packet of Madde Letters* of 1602 is built on the conceit that the letters contained in the book represent the contents of a postbag, which the author came across by chance in the street. Only in a culture in which the transmission of letters by strangers was commonplace, and in which written texts were expected to function independently of spoken language, could such a fiction be created. The outlines of the development, from orality to writing, and from dependence on the messenger to reliance on text, are clear enough. However, the chronology of the transition, and the cultural factors which governed it, have never been examined in detail. The purpose of the following discussion is to remedy this deficit, by considering in detail both evidence of practice, and the context in which change occurred.

At the close of the Middle Ages letters were still sometimes used, as they had been three centuries earlier, simply as a way of introducing an oral message. For example, the earliest known letter in English, written in 1392-3, reads:

¹³⁰ As we saw above, they may not even have been simple enough to serve at this level.

¹³¹ Discussed in Martin Camargo, 'Where's the Brief?: The *Ars Dictaminis* and Reading/Writing Between the Lines', *Disputatio* 1 (1996) :1-12 at pp. 9-10.

Dere S. I grete you wel and do you to wytyn þat at the makyng of þis lettre I was in good poynt I thank God. I send Johan Sampson bryngere of þis lettere to you enfourmed of certeyn thyngys quiche he schal tellyn you of mouthe. Qwerfore I preye you þat ye levyn hym as my persone.¹³²

By the fifteenth century, letters usually played a more important role in the transmission of information. However, the messenger might still be involved in a supplementary capacity. In the early fourteenth-century moral text *Handlyng Synne*, Robert of Brunne presents the following reflections on the moral implications of carrying letters:

Also 3yf þou euer lettre bare
And þou were þer of weyl ware,
Þogh hyt were ouþer mennys synne,
3yt art þou partable þer ynne.¹³³

Here there seems to be an assumption that even if the letter is the main vehicle of information-transmission, the messenger will be privy to its contents, and will perhaps act to support the message. A fifteenth-century example, drawn from a documentary source, presents a slightly different view. In 1469 one John Bawdewyn, cordwainer, was arrested by the civic authorities for delivering a treasonous letter. Later in the same year, however, the king wrote to the city demanding the prisoner's release:

we vndyrstond now that he was not knowyng to the conteneue of the sayd lettre, but of innocence & simplenesse deliueryd it; wherfore & for that vs thinkyth that he hathe hade longe punusshement for hys said foly, we woll that incontynent apou the syght here-of, ye deliuer hym quite owt of prison.¹³⁴

The initial supposition was that the bearer must be privy to the contents of the letter. However, upon appeal, the idea that the messenger might be ignorant of his message, that a letter could 'speak for itself', was admitted as a credible possibility.

In the fifteenth century letters could be supplemented by an oral message, or they could function in their own right, as written texts. The two options do not, however, seem to have

¹³²Quoted in C.L. Kingsford, *Prejudice and Promise in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1962), p. 23. The originals are in the London Guildhall.

¹³³F. J. Furnivall, ed., *Robert of Brunne's 'Handlyng Synne' and its French Original*, 2 vols., EETS o.s. 119, 123 (1901-03):I, p. 105, ll. 2977-80.

¹³⁴Mary Dormer Harris, ed., *The Coventry Leet Book: or Mayor's Register A.D. 1420-1555*, 4 vols., EETS o.s. 134-135, 138, 146 (1907-15):II, p. 340.

been regarded with equal favour. Rather, despite the growth in lay literacy in the later fifteenth century, oral support seems still to have been regarded as the preferred mode of letter-transmission. This can be inferred from two patterns of behaviour. The first is the apparent correlation between social status and the use of messengers to support message-text. The group least likely to supplement their letters orally were the 'middle classes'. In the Cely correspondence only a very small percentage of letters make reference to a named bearer, or refer the reader to the messenger for the oral supplementation of a text.¹³⁵ At the other end of the spectrum the nobility appear routinely to have used oral supplementation of their letters. In the York House Books servants and secretaries are frequently mentioned as conveyors of the letters and oral communications of the Percy and Clifford families.¹³⁶ Household ordinances and accounts of the nobility support this impression, showing that retainers were regularly required to deliver letters and messages on behalf of their masters.¹³⁷ Gentry practice appears to occupy a middle position between these two extremes. Like their merchant contemporaries, gentle correspondents sometimes relied on 'commercial' carriers to convey their letters. James Gresham wrote to John Paston I in 1450, informing him that he would send further tidings 'by sum loders þat come to Seynt Bertilemws f<ayre>'.¹³⁸ In 1466 John Wykes sent a letter to John Paston II 'by a man of the Priour of Bromholm'.¹³⁹ However individuals who were not acquaintances of the writer appear to have been regarded as less adequate bearers. In 1461, for example, Margaret Paston apologised to her husband for the absence of news:

I kowd get no massanger to London but if I wold haue sent by the scheryfys men, and I knewe nowthyr her mastyr ne them nor whedyr they wer well wylling to yow or not, and ther-for me thowt it had be no sendyng of no lettyr by hem.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵Examples occur at *CL*, No. 65, p. 59 and No. 73, p. 65.

¹³⁶*HB:I*, pp. 220, 337, 393 (2/4, ff. 9, 140, 187v); *HB:II*, pp. 480, 523, 712-13 (6, ff. 14, 51, 26-26v).

¹³⁷Examples from the Northumberland Household Books are quoted in F. George Kay, *Royal Mail: The Story of the Post in England from the Time of Edward IV to the Present Day* (London, 1951), p. 8. See also Crawford, ed., *Household Books of John Howard*, pp. 152, 156, 160 and 218 inter alia.

¹³⁸*PL:I*, No. 455, p. 42.

¹³⁹*PL:II*, No. 742, pp. 374-75 at p. 375.

¹⁴⁰*PL:I*, No. 167, pp. 276-78 at p. 276.

Many gentry letters appear to have been carried by acquaintances or servants; where this is the case the addressee is often referred to the messenger for supplementary information. In the Armbrugh Papers, for example, William Lenton is mentioned on seven occasions as a letter-bearer. On six of these the addressee is asked to 'yeve credens to my seruant William Lenton brynger of thys letter'.¹⁴¹ Where resources permitted, correspondents seem to have preferred to send letters by friends or servants. Those who could afford to, ensured that their letters were supplemented 'by mowthe'.

The second pattern which suggests a hostility to unsupported textual transmission is the tendency for important or secret messages to be transacted either wholly or partly by oral means. Some evidence can be found for this attitude in the letters of 'private' individuals. In 1454, for example, Elizabeth de Vere, Countess of Oxford wrote to John Paston I asking him to perform a service 'wher-of the berer of this shal enfourme you of myn jntent and disposicion more largely then I wole put in wrytyng'.¹⁴² Two years later John Bokkyng shows a similar caution 'I shal be with yow on Monday and Teusday [sic] next, be myn maister is aduys, and enfourme yow of all and of suche as I wil nought write.'¹⁴³ More plentiful evidence is, however, found in more public contexts. As Philip O. Beale has shown, by the later Middle Ages the crown had developed a comparatively sophisticated letter-delivery system.¹⁴⁴ The majority of missives were conveyed by quite lowly servants, such as *cursores*, *nuntii* or pursuivants, whose role was probably confined to the transmission of text. In the diplomatic context, however, letters often did little more than introduce the bearer. The substance of the message, which sometimes survives in written form, was intended to be communicated orally, by a trusted courtier or member of the king's

¹⁴¹ Carpenter, ed., *Armbrugh Papers*, pp. 68, 69, 70, 72, 168, 172, 182. For examples of servants being used to convey news orally see also inter alia *PL:I*, Nos. 81, 158, 226, 232, 279; *PL:II*, Nos. 455, 456, 456A, 457, 474, 505, 534; *SL*, Nos. 42, 66, 76, 107, 316, 320.

¹⁴² *PL:II*, No. 501, p. 98.

¹⁴³ *PL:II*, No. 549, pp. 143-44 at p. 143.

¹⁴⁴ Philip O. Beale, *A History of the Post in England from the Romans to the Stuarts* (Aldershot, 1998), Chapter 2.

administration.¹⁴⁵ Civic practice seems to follow the same pattern. In the York House Books a clear hierarchy emerges in the choice of messengers dispatched for different ends. More mundane messages appear to have been conveyed either by unnamed messengers, or by the sergeant at mace, perhaps the civic equivalent of royal pursuivants or heralds.¹⁴⁶ These messengers seem also occasionally to have conveyed oral messages. In matters of the greatest importance, however, oral transmission was always favoured. For example, when in 1485 the Earl of Northumberland was approached to settle a dispute with the king, the city did not entrust the message to paper. Rather:

it was determyned that Master John Haryngton the commune clerke of this cite shuld ride in message with writing under the seal of office of maraltie subscribed with names above writyn vnto the right noble and prepotent lord therle of Northumberland, shewing unto his lordship aswell by credence as by writing diverse maters concernyng thellecion of the recordour of this cite, which writing foloweth.¹⁴⁷

A similar hierarchy can also be seen in responses to letters at both Coventry and London.¹⁴⁸ Though allowing the text of a letter to 'speak for itself' was undoubtedly becoming more common by the fifteenth century, its ultimate dominance as a mode of communication was by no means assured. Rather, the cultural preference, as far as can be inferred, was for a letter to be supported by the oral contribution of the bearer.

In the sixteenth century oral supplementation or replacement of writing remains common in the public realm. In Rymer's *Foedera* we find numerous examples of messages sent by mouth even in the final decades of the century. In 1590, for example, the lords of the council

¹⁴⁵For examples of instructions of ambassadors or envoys dating back to the fourteenth century see Pierre Chaplais, *English Medieval Diplomatic Practice*, 2 vols. (London 1975-83):I, pp. 58-60, 72-3 and 98-101.

¹⁴⁶*HB:II*, p. 584 (6, f. 105).

¹⁴⁷*HB:I*, p. 388 (2/4, f. 183v).

¹⁴⁸In 1481 the Coventry sent the steward with a letter to the prince in response to a letter reproaching them for a riot. However, when in 1464 the city was accused of infringing the king's jurisdiction a delegation was sent to the king to defend their actions in person. Domer Harris, ed., *Coventry Leet Book:III*, pp. 493, 323. When the governors of London received a letter from Henry VI 'satis exasperatus' they abandoned their usual practice of replying by letter. Rather 'it was decreed that the Mayor and eight Aldermen should proceed with all speed to interview the lord the King at Waltham and to defend themselves against the charges brought against them'. Reginald Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London: Letter-Book K* (London, 1911), pp. 243-45.

of the King of Scotland write to the English Queen:

We ressavit your Letter of the Fourth of December, be your Servaunt Robert Bowes Thesaurare of Berwicke, and has hard his Credite deliverit to us in your Hienes name, perceaving therby the guid affectionn of your Majestie towardis yor dearest Brother, the King our Soverane ...¹⁴⁹

In less official transactions, however, a different pattern seems to emerge. In the Clifford letters, written mid-century, correspondents frequently refer addressees to the bearer for the oral supplementation of their letters.¹⁵⁰ In the letters of the Johnson family, written between 1542 and 1552, both textual and oral modes of transmission find their supporters. In 1542 Otwell Johnson writes to his brother John:

Of the newes of Flandres ... this berar, Mr Flecton, can instructe boeth Mr Cave and you by mought [mouth] better than I have other leasur or lust to write at this tyme.¹⁵¹

Three years later Parson Saxby states a rather different view:

I pray you, send me yore mynd yn wrytting by thys brynger for the folle cannot showe me yt by word of mowthe.¹⁵²

By the second half of the century, however, oral supplementation seems to have fallen sharply out of favour. In the Thynne and Bacon collections occasional references to 'credence' can still be found. In 1575, for example, John More writes to Nathaniel Bacon:

Good Mr Bacon, accordyng unto your request the man is sent unto yow; by conference with hym you shall perceyve more.¹⁵³

Yet by this period statements of this kind are found in only a tiny minority of letters.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹Thomas Rymer, ed., *Foedera*, 10 vols. (London, 1739-45):VII, p. 15.

¹⁵⁰A. G. Dickens, ed., *Clifford Letters of the Sixteenth Century*, Surtees Society 172 (1957), pp. 94, 103, 108, 111, 121, 123. See also the letters of Margaret, Queen of Scotland to Henry VIII, 'þes berar can schew zou þe trowht of all, and vhat my mynd is ... And I pray zou gyf him kredens as ze valde doo to my selþe, for it is owr lang to wryte, for I have gret trost in þes man' in Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 3: I, p. 127.

¹⁵¹Winchester, 'Johnson Letters': II, No. 14, p. 23.

¹⁵²*Ibid.*:II, No. 96, p. 194.

¹⁵³*NBL*:I, p. 176. Even as late as the seventeenth century allusions of this kind are sometimes seen. Thomas Knyvett writes to his wife 'This messinger can tell you (if he brings his memorye with him) that we wear verye civillye merye ...' Bertram Schofield, ed., *The Knyvett Letters, 1620-1644*, Norfolk Record Society 20 (1949), No. 24, p. 75.

¹⁵⁴So infrequent are allusions to credence in these collections that they can scarcely be expressed in percentage

Furthermore, when requesting the addressee to send 'word' by a messenger, most correspondents now follow the example of Parson Saxby, explicitly stating that this should be done in writing, rather than by mouth.

This shift in habits is an interesting historical fact, which has not hitherto been observed. Yet in order to assess its significance we must first understand its cause or causes. The obvious starting point for such an investigation would be the developments in the postal system associated with the Tudor period. From the reign of Henry VIII onwards, the royal posts were the object of a series of reforms. Around 1512, for example, an officiating minister, designated 'Master of the Posts' was appointed to improve the efficiency of the system.¹⁵⁵ However, though these innovations speeded the transaction of government business, it seems unlikely that they had much impact on the transmission of ordinary letters. Breton's fictions notwithstanding, it was not until 1635 that the royal post officially began to carry the letters of the public, as well as those produced by the royal bureaucracy.¹⁵⁶ Lacking access to this improved service, most correspondents in the second half of our period seem to have relied on much the same methods as their predecessors. The Bacon family seem to have used relatives to deliver their letters where possible. For example, in 1572 Anne wrote to her step-mother:

I am in good hope that your Ladyship conceiveth no ill of me, notwithstanding that I have not since my departure from Gorhambury written any letter to yow. The time hath not ben long since my comminge from thence, & fewe convenient messengers have chaunced, at the lest none more convenient than my brother Windam, who is the bearer herof.¹⁵⁷

Besides these, the most frequently mentioned bearers in this collection are family servants or retainers.¹⁵⁸ In the Barrington letters of the early seventeenth century, servants and relatives continue to serve alongside commercial carriers as letter-bearers. In 1630, for

terms. The same is true of the Thynne Letters, the Barrington Letters, and in the correspondence of Ladies Katherine Paston and Brilliana Harley.

¹⁵⁵Beale, *History of the Post*, pp. 113-36.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 224-27; Kay, *Royal Mail*, p. 24.

¹⁵⁷NBL:I, p. 23.

¹⁵⁸See, for example, Ibid.,:I, pp. 26, 73, 74, 118, 188, 190, 204.

example, Judith Barrington wrote to her mother:

You must pardon my troubling of you soe soone againe, for Toby will not think himselfe well used sence he brought me a letter if he maye not returne one againe ...¹⁵⁹

Letters continued to be delivered by regular carriers or by acquaintances of the addressee. What then might account for the shift away from oral supplementation? One possibility is that the period witnesses a cultural shift in perceptions of speech and writing. As many commentators have noticed, in the later medieval period some of the most influential philosophical texts presented a negative view of the written word as compared to speech. In Plato's *Phaedrus* Socrates condemns writing as 'alien' and as a threat to human memory. In the opening of *De interpretatione*, a foundational text of Scholastic philosophy, Aristotle also denigrates writing as compared to speech. For Aristotle the ultimate source of truth lies in the universal language of the soul. While speech stands in close relation to this language, writing is at two removes, and is thus less reliable:

Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds.¹⁶⁰

In the sixteenth-century, by contrast, many writers were arguing for the superiority of writing over speech. According to Erasmus and Fulwood writing was a technology which safeguarded secrets more effectively than speech.¹⁶¹ Hart and Mulcaster argue that literacy serves the common wealth and preserves the thoughts of the writer for posterity.¹⁶² In his *Book at Large* William Bullokar suggests that writing is *less* likely to be misinterpreted than speech:

To letters which for picture true, of speech were first deuizd,
in all times guiding men aright *when speech is halfe disgzd*.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹Searle, ed., *Barrington Family Letters*, p. 145.

¹⁶⁰Aristotle, *Categories and De interpretatione*, trans. J. L. Ackrill (Oxford, 1963), p. 43.

¹⁶¹A. S. Osley, *Scribes and Sources* (London, 1980), p. 29; Fulwood, *The Enimie of Idlennesse*, Aiii recto, '[A letter] blabbeth not abroad the hid and secret of our minde/To any one, save unto him to whome we have assignde'.

¹⁶²Richard Mulcaster, *The First Part of the Elementary 1582* (reprint, Menston, 1970), p. iv; John Hart, *An Orthographie 1569* (reprint, Menston, 1969), p. v.

¹⁶³William Bullokar, *Book at Large (1580) and Bref Grammar for English (1586)* (reprint, New York, 1977), Prologue.

There are, however, a number of problems with this simple chronology. First, though authorities such as Erasmus appear to promote writing, humanist language theory continued to represent speech as a mode of expression which was superior to writing. Renaissance theorists rejected the Scholastics' understanding of the relationship between speech and *thought*, yet concerning speech and *writing* they concurred with Aristotle; speech stood closer to 'truth' than did the written word.¹⁶⁴ The second problem is that many authors represent writing as preferable to speech well before the beginning of our period. In his treatise of 1228/9, for example, Guido Faba defines a letter as follows:

Epistola est libellus absenti vel absentibus destinatus, et dicitur epistola ab *epi*, quod est supra, et *stola*, vel *stolon*, quod est *missio*, quod supra id quod nuntius posset mittentis affectum declarat. Nam propter oblivionem mentis et multipliciter negotiorum et discrimina viarum multa essent preterita, que epistola quasi speculum representat.¹⁶⁵

The arguments of 'writing masters' such as Hart, Mulcaster and Bullokar are restatements of ideas which had already attained formulaic status in the writings of the *dictatores*.¹⁶⁶ Rather than one attitude displacing the other, the two views coexist both in the periods under study and indeed much later.¹⁶⁷ The extent to which one will be privileged over the other depends not on date, but on context and discursive positioning.

If positive and negative views of writing seem to have had equal currency in later medieval and early modern England, what then might account for the decline in the oral supplementation of letters in the sixteenth century? One answer might be that what Clanchy

¹⁶⁴Martin Elsky, *Authorizing Words: Speech, Writing and Print in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca and London, 1989), pp. 35-69.

¹⁶⁵Quoted in Camargo, 'Where's the Brief?', at p. 15. Camargo offers the following translation, p. 2:
An epistle is a booklet sent to one or several absent persons and it is called 'epistle' from *epi*, which is 'beyond' and *stola* or *stolon*, which is 'sending', because it makes the sender's desire clear 'beyond' a messenger's capacity to expound it. For on account of the mind's forgetfulness and the multiplicity of affairs and the distances of journeys many things would be omitted, which an epistle represents like a mirror.

¹⁶⁶For further examples of this trope in dictaminal treatises see Rockinger, ed., *Briefsteller und Formelbücher*.

¹⁶⁷See Francis Osborne's 'Advice to a Son' in which he argues that writing 'many years after may rise up in judgement against you when things spoken may be forgot'. Quoted in Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order*, p. 9. Even in modern novels letters are used both to expose wrongdoing and to callumniate the innocent, to both avert and precipitate misunderstanding.

has dubbed 'the literate mentality' becomes more firmly entrenched as the period progresses.¹⁶⁸ One area in which this can be seen is in attitudes towards composition. As late as the seventeenth century writing continued to be seen as a physically demanding task; correspondents often excuse themselves from writing when suffering from comparatively minor physical ailments, such as a sore throat, which would not now be regarded as an obstacle.¹⁶⁹ However, by the late sixteenth century writers have become noticeably readier to pen letters when they have no pressing news to convey, or when the message seems simple enough to have been entrusted to a messenger. Around 1576, for example, Elizabeth Doyly writes to her brother Nathaniel:

Good brother, thes are to let yow to understand that Mr Doyly is come in to the contrey and menthe to se yow the nex w[?eek]. I pray yow, yf yow can, helpe me with a hundred of gren cod fishe ...¹⁷⁰

The readiness of a woman to undertake the task of writing in order to convey such simple instructions marks a clear shift both in abilities and in attitudes towards the written word.

The second area in which change can be seen is in the management of information. In the fifteenth century some writers preferred to receive written texts, whereas others continued to place greater trust in the credence of messengers. In the sixteenth century, however, correspondents seem to have developed habits which presuppose, or even require that a message be received in written form. In the correspondence of Nathaniel Bacon, for example, letters are constantly forwarded from individual to individual for the purposes of reference and discussion. In 1572 Nathaniel wrote to his father, for example:

I have sent your Lordship herin enclosed a particular valewe of your two fearmes in Styfkey drawn by Moumforde in so perfect order as he can, & I have reserved to my self copies of the same ... I have herin also enclosed a letter sent me by Sir Thomas Gresham, & under it I have written a copie of the letter which presently upon the receipte of this I wrot backe againe unto him.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*, second edition (Oxford, 1993), Part II, passim.

¹⁶⁹Searle, ed., *Barrington Letters*, p. 105. See also p. 97: 'now my wife tenders her lame legg for an excuse that her hand present yow not her dutye'.

¹⁷⁰*NBL*:I, p. 224.

¹⁷¹*Ibid.*:I, p. 35.

The preservation of fifteenth-century letter collections probably already reflects an instinct to preserve and record. By the sixteenth century, however, this motivation is both clearer and more fully realised. The collections of the Johnsons, Bacons and Barringtons all show evidence of deliberate archiving which is lacking in earlier correspondence.¹⁷² Ordinary laymen now appear to have regarded letters as permanent records; for this purpose presentation of the complete message in written form was an essential prerequisite.

The second reason is less tangible, but perhaps just as influential as the first. From the middle of the sixteenth century individuals appear increasingly concerned about the role of intermediaries in their epistolary transactions.¹⁷³ The first area in which this might be seen is in a growing preference for letters to be written in the hand of the signatory. The earliest clear statement of this preference is that which Lady Lisle made to her husband:

my meaning therin is not to require yow to take so much payn as to wryght to me of your own hande for all your busynes or necessarye affayres but onlye at your owne pleasure of suche secret thynges as yt shall pleas yow to advertyse me off and at your convenyent leysire to sygnyfye unto me parte of your gentill harte whyche unto me shalbee most reioyce and comfort.¹⁷⁴

For some writers autography remained impossible even at the close of the century. But even in these cases a concern to control access to the process of composition may perhaps be discerned. In 1592 Mary Hardyng wrote to the Countess of Cumberland:

Umbely beseching your honor not to be ofended withe me for that I write noe oftner to your honour. Thee caues [sic] is that I cannot write myselfe and I am louthe to make any body acquainted withe my leaters.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷²Winchester, *Tudor Family Portrait*, pp. 233-34; Searle, ed., *Barrington Letters*, pp. 21-24; *NBL*:I, pp. xix-xx. See also Hoyle, ed., *Letters of the Cliffords*, p. 11; Susan Whyman, 'Paper visits': the post-Restoration letter as seen through the Verney family archive', in Rebecca Earle, ed., *Epistolary Selves: letters and letter-writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 15-35, at p. 17.

¹⁷³Pollock discusses changing attitudes to servants in this period, coming to the conclusion that 'Servants were a perennial hindrance in the quest for privacy and recognised as such.' Linda A. Pollock, 'Living on the stage of the world: the concept of privacy among the elite of early modern England', in Adrian Wilson, ed., *Rethinking Social History: English Society 1570-1920 and its interpretation* (Manchester, 1993), pp. 78-96 at p. 86.

¹⁷⁴PRO, SP3/1/45.

¹⁷⁵HMC, *The Manuscripts of His Grace the Duke of Rutland ... preserved at Belvoir Castle*, 4 vols., ed. R Ward et al. (London, 1888-1905):I, p. 301.

In the Paston and Barrington letters of the early seventeenth century a similar concern might be read into the preference of writers who are indisposed to use relatives rather than servants as secretaries. For example, Sir John Heveningham writes to his sister-in-law Lady Katherine Paston:

Most worthy Sister/ my wife desireth me to be her secretary, she beinge very busy in preservinge ...¹⁷⁶

When unable to write herself, Elizabeth, countess of Shrewsbury wrote by the hand of her son, assuring her addressee Lord Burghley that 'he only is pryvy to your lordships letter'.¹⁷⁷

Two intertwined ideas might be at work here. The first might be changing perceptions of privacy. In the fifteenth century the servants of the aristocracy had formed part of the 'familia', sharing in the intimate concerns of their masters. The eschewal of servants as secretaries in the later sixteenth century may reflect a new concern to preserve 'secret thynges' within the heart of the biological family. In a climate in which individuals no longer wished to dictate letters full of sweet nothings to their servants, it is understandable that messengers should also have been regarded increasingly as bearers of texts rather than of messages. The second factor is more philosophical. In *De recta Graeci et Latini sermonis pronunciatione* Erasmus disparages messengers on the grounds that 'even if he reports everything in good faith, he still cannot reproduce the force of a glance, or expression, a look or a voice.'¹⁷⁸ If the emphasis on autography represents a concern to represent a particular self, to capture the peculiar lineaments of a relationships, then here too we see a reason for privileging writing above orality as a mode of transmission. The *dictatores* concern about messengers had been that they might forget the details of the message with which they had been entrusted. By the fifteenth century, this defect seems to have been remedied by the use of notes or memoranda, which prevented omissions, but which still allowed the final message to be delivered orally. The introduction of the idea of personal authenticity, which made the letter-text more valuable than the mere message, may have

¹⁷⁶Ruth Hughey, ed., *The Correspondence of Lady Katherine Paston, 1603-1627*, Norfolk Record Society 14 (1941), p. 57. See also Searle, ed., *Barrington Letters*, pp. 104-05 and 189.

¹⁷⁷BL, MS Lansdowne 71, f. 2 (1592). (Quoted in Daybell 'Women's Letters and Letter-Writing', p. 94.)

¹⁷⁸Osley, *Scribes and Sources*, p. 30.

tipped the fine balance. In the 'private sphere' new ideas about privacy and identity may have supplemented the growing confidence in and dependence upon the written word, effecting a shift from preference for speech to a greater dependence on writing.

Reception

The outlines of letter transmission can be reconstructed with some degree of confidence. Reception, the final stage in the epistolary transaction, is a rather more elusive practice. In 1942 H. G. Richardson stated with assurance that all medieval letters were intended 'not only to be read, but to be read aloud'.¹⁷⁹ Richardson's assertion is premised on the idea that the Middle Ages was a period in which oral communication was the dominant mode. Since his time the idea that an 'oral Middle Ages' gave way to a 'literate' Renaissance has met with strong challenge.¹⁸⁰ Michael Clanchy's pioneering study *From Memory to Written Record*, for example, demonstrates persuasively that silent reading was a mode of textual consumption already available to laymen by the High Middle Ages.¹⁸¹ Keith Thomas and Roger Chartier have propounded the complementary argument that oral delivery was not displaced by the invention of printing; rather, a variety of modes of reception were practised both before and after this 'watershed'.¹⁸² This new appreciation of the complexity of textual practices has bred defeatism among some historians of letter-writing. Malcolm Richardson suggests, for example:

¹⁷⁹Richardson, 'Letters of the Oxford *Dictatores*', p. 331.

¹⁸⁰Two important contributors to the view of medieval England as an oral society are H. J. Chaytor, 'The Medieval Reader and Textual Criticism', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 26 (1941): 49-56 and idem, *From Script to Print* (New York, 1967) and Ruth Crosby, 'Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 11 (1936): 88-110. As late as 1982 Paul Saenger writes 'In a curious fashion, recent scholars, inspired by McLuhan, have substituted an oral Middle Ages, terminating in a silent Renaissance, for the more traditional view of a Middle Ages of silent prayer and a Renaissance characterised by a revival of the antique passion for eloquent public discourse.' Paul Saenger, 'Silent Reading: Its Impact on Late Medieval Script and Society', *Viator* 13 (1982): 367-414 at pp. 369-70.

¹⁸¹Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record* and idem, 'Looking Back from the Invention of Printing', in Daniel P. Resnick, ed., *Literacy in Historical Perspective* (Washington D.C., 1983), pp. 7-22.

¹⁸²Roger Chartier, 'The practical uses of writing', in idem, ed., *A History of Private Life III: Passions of the Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1989); Keith Thomas, 'The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern England' in Gerd Baumann, ed., *The Written Word. Literacy in Transition* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 97-133.

Non-royal letter recipients like the Stoners [sic] and Pastons probably read their own messages silently, but even then perhaps read them aloud later to the rest of the household. Given the problems of defining medieval literacy and its implications, there is no way of telling.¹⁸³

Ronald Witt's contribution to this debate is equally pessimistic:

Official letters were doubtless read aloud as a rule but the extent to which other correspondence was delivered orally cannot be determined.¹⁸⁴

In contrast to these scholars, I would argue that the present juncture offers a promising opportunity to re-investigate the reception of letters. As part of their challenge to the work of Chaytor and Crosby, Clanchy, Thomas and Chartier have pioneered new interpretative techniques based on consideration of a wide range of sources, both literary and documentary. This work has been furthered by that of Saenger and Coleman, who have developed modes of textual criticism which have yet to be applied to letters.¹⁸⁵ In the following discussion I will follow the insights of these scholars, juxtaposing a range of sources and interpretive techniques in order to present a thorough examination of the evidence for the reception of letters in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

i. Internal Evidence

The obvious starting point for an exploration of later medieval reception practices is internal evidence, that is the vocabulary used within letters to describe the response of the recipient. In some of the letters written in the official context - royal letters patent and letters testimonial - the evidence seems quite unequivocal; these texts contain collocations such as 'all those hearing and seeing these letters', which seem clearly to indicate an aural as well as a visual reception. Clanchy shows a decline in allusions to 'hearing' in charters as early as the thirteenth century. However, in letters, references to 'hearing' persist well into the

¹⁸³Richardson, 'Medieval English Vernacular Correspondence', p. 107.

¹⁸⁴Ronald Witt, 'Medieval 'Ars Dictaminis' and the Beginnings of Humanism: A New Construction of the Problem', *Renaissance Quarterly* 35 (1982):1-35 at p. 6, n.8.

¹⁸⁵See Saenger, 'Silent Reading'. For a full statement of the thesis see idem, *Space Between the Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford, 1997).

later Middle Ages. Chaytor quotes Anglo-Norman examples from the fourteenth century.¹⁸⁶ The same phrase can also be seen in fifteenth-century texts. For example, a letter testimonial promulgated by the mayor of York in 1484 opens:

To all true Cristen people this present writing hering or seing, Thomas Wrangwish maire of (York) the cite of York sendes greting in our lorde God everlastyng ...¹⁸⁷

It would therefore seem that, at least in some contexts, H. G. Richardson's observation is correct, 'a deed, like a letter, was a message not only to be read, but to be read aloud'.¹⁸⁸

Such an interpretation is not, however, unproblematic. First, by this period an equal if not greater number of documents contain allusions not to hearing, but more ambiguously to 'all those to whom this writing shall come'.¹⁸⁹ Second, even statements as apparently transparent as those seen above may not be as straightforward as they first appear. As we saw in section three above, late medieval England was a society in which speech was often constructed as superior to writing. It therefore seems possible that a fiction of orality might be considered seemly in documents whose production and reception had, in reality, already become wholly textual. Manfred Scholz has argued for precisely this kind of effect in medieval German literature, suggesting that invocations to 'hear' a tale are often belied by internal evidence of a purely textual reception.¹⁹⁰ In this setting orality is a discourse (produced by respect for tradition or perhaps nostalgia) rather than a reflection of actual practice. In fact the pressure to create discursive orality in the legal context in which these letters were produced is likely have been considerable: Clanchy has demonstrated that the continued emphasis on oral witness as the basis of legal procedure was producing legal

¹⁸⁶Chaytor, *From Script to Print*, p. 144.

¹⁸⁷*HB*:I, p. 327 See also Elizabeth Ralph, ed., *The Great White Book of Bristol*, Bristol Record Society 32 (1979), p. 100; Maud Sellars, ed., *York Memorandum Book*, 2 vols., Surtees Society 120 and 125 (1912-15):II, pp. 48-49.

¹⁸⁸Richardson, 'Letters of the Oxford *Dictatores*', p. 331.

¹⁸⁹*HB*:I, p. 326; II, pp. 499, 519, 540; Ralph, ed., *Great White Book*, pp. 59, 96.

¹⁹⁰M.G. Scholz, *Hören und Lesen. Studien zur primären Rezeption der Literatur im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden, 1980), discussed in D.H. Green, 'On the Primary Reception of Narrative Literature in Medieval Germany', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 20 (1984): 289-308.

'fictions' by the thirteenth century.¹⁹¹ Clearly then, the vocabulary of official letters is not a reliable guide to actual practices of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Similar problems beset our use of the internal evidence of letters received in more ordinary contexts. In the Paston collection a few sentences can be found which seem unambiguous in their description of practices. In 1454, for example, Thomas Howes describes the reception of a letter sent by John Paston I in the following terms: 'And my maistre herd the substaunce of your lettre red and lyked it rist well'.¹⁹² In 1470 Sir John Paston writes to his younger brother urging 'I praye yow schewe ore rede to my moodre suche thynges as ye thynke is fore here to knowe, afftre yowre dyscression'.¹⁹³ More often, however, descriptions of reception practice are ambiguous and even deceptive. For example, writers sometimes refer to the act of 'seeing' a letter, which seems to indicate a process of visual assimilation. However, an examination of the use of the verb in other contexts suggests caution. In 1462 John Frende wrote to Thomas Stonor with the request that 'my maister Drayton may se this letter, and be enformyd thereof'.¹⁹⁴ 'Enformyd' seems here to suggest an oral briefing distinct, or at least supplementary, to the process of visual perception. William Paston II's statement to his eldest brother that a royal letter was both 'sene and red be me', seems to reinforce the idea that seeing a letter was not self-evidently equivalent to knowing its contents.¹⁹⁵ Another 'visual' verb found in connection with letters is 'to show', which appears in phrases such as 'be ware to whom ye shew 3our letters'.¹⁹⁶ On occasion the visual connotations of this word seem indisputable. For example, in a letter written by Thomas Hampton to Thomas Stonor in 1462, an extended postscript is explained by reference to the physical form of the letter:

Moreover, Syr, I wryte aparte þat hit may be kette away, þyff [sic] ye lust to

¹⁹¹Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, pp. 272-8. See especially the case described on p. 275.

¹⁹²*PL:II*, No.507, pp. 102-03.

¹⁹³*PL:I*, No. 248, pp. 412-15 at p. 415.

¹⁹⁴*SL*, No. 64, pp. 144-45 at p. 145.

¹⁹⁵*PL:I*, No. 90, pp. 165-66 at p. 165.

¹⁹⁶*PL:II*, No. 472, pp. 62-63 at p. 63.

schew þis above unto þe parson of Sylverton.¹⁹⁷

However, as the *Middle English Dictionary* suggests, the same word could also connote the intellectual, rather than the visual assimilation of meaning in this period.¹⁹⁸ Indeed, the fact that invitations to ‘show’ letters sometimes refer to the conceptual contents, rather than the physical text, is confirmed by internal evidence. For example, Edward Plumpton, concludes a letter to Sir Robert in 1483:

Pleaseth it your mastership, in my most humble wyse to recomend me unto my good ladyes ... as more at þe larg the brynger of this shall *shew vnto you by mouth*, to whom I pray you giue credence.¹⁹⁹

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to an understanding of the reception of letters on the basis of internal evidence is the infrequency with which words indicating any kind of process occur. Gentry letters abound in apparently obfuscatory expressions such as ‘I conseyve by 3owr wrytting’, ‘I fele by 3owr wrytting’ or even ‘I constrew your letter’.²⁰⁰ In the second half of the century correspondents do sometimes use ‘read’ to describe the reception of letters, and where encountered this should perhaps be understood in the modern sense of ‘silent reading’, or perhaps reading aloud to oneself. The correspondents who make most frequent use of this expression are those represented in the Cely collection. It is logical that this group, who lacked the kinds of servant who served as textual mediators in aristocratic households, should be those most ‘modern’ in their reception as well as in their writing practices. Another explanation is also possible, however. As we saw above, the other peculiarity of merchant writers was their relative lack of exposure to Latin treatises on *dictamen*. It seems possible that the terms ‘conceive’, ‘understand’, and their direct antecedent ‘entendre’, derive from dictaminal assertions that textual transmission was a transparent process, in which the thoughts of the writer were conveyed directly and unproblematically to the reader.²⁰¹ Thus, as with ‘legal’ letters, so too with more ordinary

¹⁹⁷*SL*, No. 65, p. 146.

¹⁹⁸*MED*, sheuen, (v)1 senses 5 and 7.

¹⁹⁹Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 38, pp. 59-60 at p.60.

²⁰⁰*SL*, No. 99, p. 192; *PL:I*, No. 106, p. 186; *SL*, No. 99, p. 192.

²⁰¹Camargo, ‘Where’s the Brief’, p. 15.

missives, real practice may be obscured by discourse - by the desire of writers to conform with social convention and ideological strictures surrounding the relationship between speech and writing

ii. Literary and Documentary Description

In the absence of firm evidence of practice in letters themselves, it seems appropriate to consider descriptions of reception found in other sources. The arena which is most readily illuminated by this approach is that of the royal court. As we saw above, in relation to transmission practices, romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries depict letter-reception at royal courts as a public transaction. For example, Chaytor uses a scene from Beroul's *Tristan* to show the dominance of oral reading in the twelfth-century. The king urges his chaplain: 'Dan chapelain, lisiez le brief/ oiant nos toz, de chief en chief'.²⁰² At first sight descriptions of letter-reception in late medieval texts do not appear very different to the accounts given in these early romance. In Froissart's chronicle, for example, the reception of a letter at the court of King Henry in 1367 is described as follows:

And the moost part of the great lordes of the hoost came thyder to here what tidynges their heraude had brought. Than the haraud kneled downe and delyvered the kyng the lettre fro the Prince. The kyng toke it and opened it and called to him sir Bertram of Clesquy, and dyvers other knights of his counsell. There the lettir was reed and well consydred.²⁰³

In this scene, as in Beroul's *Tristan*, the letter is read aloud before an audience of counsellors. However, closer examination reveals important differences. Where in the earlier text the letter is explicated to the king by a more competent authority, in Froissart the king takes the letter himself. It is not clear in this passage whether it is the king himself who reads the letter to counsellors. What is implied, however, is that the king could have read the letter silently had he so wished. Both in Froissart and in other chronicles of similar date, where no courtiers are present at the moment of the letter's arrival, the king is indeed

²⁰²Chaytor, *From Script to Print*, p. 144. See also, for example, Lewis Thorpe, ed., *Le roman de Silence* (Cambridge, 1992), ll. 4251-58.

²⁰³Jean Froissart, *The Chronicle of Froissart translated out of French by Sir John Bouchier, Lord Berners, Annis 1523-25*, 6 vols. (London, 1901): II, p. 203. See also IV, pp. 251-52: 'Then the ii messagers kneled downe before the kynge, and Laurence Fongase delyvered his letters. The kynge toke them, and caused them to be redde ...'

depicted reading the text silently to himself. For example, in *Lystoire de la Traïson et Mort du Roy Richart*, the Earl of Northumberland delivers a letter to the king:

Le Roy prist les lectres & regarda le seel & vit que cestoit le seel de son frere
Adonc ouura les lectres & les lut ...²⁰⁴

In these texts oral delivery is clearly not selected because reading competence was confined to the clerical or bureaucratic cadres.²⁰⁵ Kings and princes are shown to be capable of reading - a suggestion the veracity of which is supported by documentary evidence at this date.²⁰⁶ In these texts, reading aloud appears to be a product of situation. It is not the technical abilities of the individuals involved which is the determinant, but rather the context, which suggests the requirement to consult.

Chronicle evidence, though in some sense fictive, nevertheless stakes a claim to depict real events. A source of a different kind offers complementary insights into the reception of letters in a different, though related, setting. As we saw in the section one, borough records represent a documentary context in which a wide variety of letters have been preserved. In some cases a brief description is offered concerning the reception of these documents into the custody of the registering authorities. In the London Letter-Books such entries are usually perfunctory, and less helpful, on their own, than the depictions found in romances; the stereotyped phrase 'lecta et intellecta' presents the kind of problems discussed above.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Benjamin Williams, ed., *Chronique de la Traïson et Mort de Richart Deux Roy Dengleterre* (London, 1846), p. 48. See also Froissart, *The Chronicle of Froissart*: IV, p. 251 'the duke toke his [letter] , and the duchess hers and so they reyde theyr letters'.

²⁰⁵ Romances of this period also depict reception as dependent on situation rather than ability to read. See A. F. T. Bödtker, ed., *The Middle English versions of Partonope of Blois*, EETS e.s. 109 (1912), p. 121, ll. 3529-3537; F. J. Furnivall, ed., *The Three Kings' Sons*, EETS e.s. 67 (1895), p. 22, ll. 13-15; Hardin Craig, ed., *The Works of John Metham, including the Romance of Amoryus and Cleopes*, EETS o.s. 132 (1916), verse 28, p. 8. In the fourteenth-century romance *Beues of Hamtoun* different manuscripts present different accounts of reception, one showing the king using a clerk, the other depicting silent reception. Eugen Kölling, ed., *The Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, EETS e.s. 46, 48 and 65 (1885-94):I, pp. 69-70, ll. 1223-24 and p. 70, ll. 1389-92. See also the reception of letters in Malory, discussed below.

²⁰⁶ The depiction of reading as an ability of monarchs in these romances coincides with early evidence of regal literacy in documentary sources. The first clear evidence that English monarchs were able to write is a letter of Edward III, dated c.1330, in which he proposes to use his own hand as a secret sign. Pierre Chaplais, *English Medieval Diplomatic Practice: Part I*:I, No. 18, p. 21. Richard II was the first king regularly to sign his letters.

²⁰⁷ Corporation of London Record Office, Letter Book I, ff. 6, 123, etc. An entry in Letter-Book K, f. 10 is close to the forms found in Coventry and York. 'The whiche bille after þat hit was redde herde and diligently

In other cities, however, entries are fuller and less ambiguous. For example, in 1455 the city of Coventry received a letter from the King requiring military service. The entry accompanying the letter text reads:

Wherapon the saide meire, the tenour of this letter be hym well considered, lat calle to come afore hym counsell of this Cite with his bredum afore whome this letter was redde ...²⁰⁸

Some thirty years later, a similar description is found in the *York House Books*:

Which letter was oppynly red bifore the maier, aldremen and commune counsaill of (of) the cite of York, first in the counsaill chambre within the Guilhall and after bifore all the comons of the said cite in the said Guilhall ther assembled, where and when aswell the said maier, aldremen, shereffes and commune counsaill forsaide as the said commons was agreed eithre to othre holding up ther handes²⁰⁹

As in the depictions of the letter-reception at the royal court, it seems that the oral reading of letters in these cases was a function not of the reading ability of those present, but rather of the constitutional requirements of the context. Letters were read aloud because all council members, and also, in the second case the commons, had to be seen to have been informed and consulted, according to their rights.²¹⁰ Given these motives, it is no surprise to find almost identical descriptions of letter-reception in much later records. For example, in 1594 the Leicester records state:

Item, the Earle of Huntingdons lettre, sent to Mr Maior, towchinge the remoavinge of Thomas Jesson the head vssher of the schoole from the schoole was openly readd, and agreed vpon to haue hym tried before by some lerned man, or his sufficienty before he be remoaved, etc.²¹¹

In 1630 the Diary of the Corporation of Reading records the 'open' reading of letters from the King's Council and from the Earl of Banbury.²¹²

understonde by þe mair and aldermen ...'.

²⁰⁸Dormer Harris, ed., *Coventry Leet Book*:II, p. 282.

²⁰⁹*HB*:II, p. 569.

²¹⁰The principle is the same as that on which the reading of bills, in the modern House of Commons, is predicated.

²¹¹Mary Bateson, ed., *Records of the Borough of Leicester, being a series of Extracts from the Archives of the Corporation of Leicester*, 6 vols. (Cambridge, 1899-1905): III, p. 298.

²¹²J. M. Guilding, ed., *Reading Records: Diary of the Corporation*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1892-96):III, pp. 21-

If silent reading is represented as a practical possibility from the fourteenth century, and its rejection a function of particular social contexts, the depiction of the reception of more personal missives promises to offer important insights into the organisation of values around textuality in the later medieval period. Given the nature of the romance genre, many of the writing contexts which we would like to investigate, such as the exchange of letters between husbands and wives, parents and children and siblings, are under-represented. What we do have in abundance are representations of the reception of love letters, which might function as a kind of standard of intimacy in letter-writing practice. The depiction of the reception of love letters falls into a pattern quite different to that which we saw in relation to 'curial' letters. An unusually detailed description of the reception of love letters is found in *Clariodus*, a Scottish romance composed in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century.²¹³ Here the emphasis is clearly on the internal, intimate nature of reading. At the opening of the scene the addressee, Meliades, is located in a secluded space, into which the messenger intrudes :

Rycht soune unto Meliades he went,
And fand hir in hir wairdrope quyetlie,
Playand on ane hearpe rycht mirrilie.²¹⁴

After delivering a short introduction, consisting merely of a commendation and an assurance of Clariodus's imminent return, the messenger offers the physical text of the letter to the lady for her personal perusal. Though the contents of the letter have already been shown to the reader, in the dramatic context of the narrative they are revealed to Meliades's eyes alone:

And heir ar lettris that he derectit me,
And bad me to 3our Hienes them present.
Scho them resavit than incontinent,
And rede...²¹⁵

22.

²¹³D. Irving, ed., *Clariodus: A Metrical Romance* (Edinburgh, 1830). The only known version of this romance is in a sixteenth century manuscript. However, it may have been written at the end of the previous century. Lillian Herland Hornstein 'Miscellaneous Romances', in J. Burke Severs, ed., *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500, Fascicle 1: Romances* (New Haven, 1987), pp. 144-172 at p. 158.

²¹⁴Irving, ed., *Clariodus*, p. 65. Book 2, ll. 444-46.

²¹⁵Ibid., p. 65. Book 2, ll. 456-59.

Troilus and Criseyde was composed at least a century before *Clariodus*. Yet in this text too, the reading of love letters is presented as a silent, intimate experience, explicitly characterised by the language of privacy. Pandarus may force Criseyde to take note of Troilus' first letter by thrusting it into her dress, but the later perusal of its contents is presented once again as both independent of the messenger, and as positioned in secluded space:

And streght into hire chamber gan she gon;
 But of hire besynesses this was on -
 Amonges othere thynges, out of drede -
 Ful pryvely this lettre for to rede...²¹⁶

Troilus's melancholy re-reading of Criseyde's letters, after her departure, is marked even more clearly as silent and meditative:

The lettres ek that she of olde tyme
 Hadde hym ysent, he wolde allone rede
 An sithe atwixen noon and prime...²¹⁷

Not all love letters are treated in this 'modern' fashion, however. In the context of what appears to have been a standard treatment of love letters in later medieval romance, the oral delivery of the letter of the Fair Maid of Astolat in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* represents an important exception. At the point in the narrative at which the missive is discovered, clasped in the hand of the 'fayre corse', the reader is aware that its author has died of love, and that composition was one of her final actions. The letter, however, is opened in public, and read aloud:

And so whan the kynge was com to hys chambir he called many knyghtes
 aboute hym and seyde that he wolde wete opynly what was wryten within that
 lettir. Than the kynge brake hit and made a clerke to rede hit, and thys was the
 entente of the lettir.²¹⁸

The revelation of the contents of the letter, not just by public reading, but to an audience

²¹⁶Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* in L. D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford, 1987), Book II, ll. 1173-76.

²¹⁷*Troilus and Criseyde*, Book V, ll. 470-73.

²¹⁸E. Vinaver, ed., *Malory: Works*, one volume text of second edition (Oxford, 1971), Book XVIII, p. 641, ll. 6-10.

summoned for the purpose, seems a surprising, perhaps even a shocking, treatment of such an apparently intimate document. Neither can such treatment be explained simply by reference to the characters' (as opposed to the readers') ignorance of the letter's contents. When Sir Lancelot is later confronted with the Fair Maid's fate he is not offered the letter for private contemplation, but rather 'kyngge Arthure made the lettir to be rad to hym'.²¹⁹

How can this anomaly be accounted for? Apart from the context of composition, the main cue to the reader that this text is intended as a private communication is the opening address:

Moste noble knyght, my lorde sir Launcelot, now hath dethe made us two at
debate for youre love.²²⁰

The singular address, and the pronoun 'us' constructs the message as a personal one, from the lady to her lover. But this is not the only readership implied. In the third line of the letter a wider audience is invoked:

Therefore unto all ladyes I make my mone, yet for my soule ye pray and bury
me at the leste, and offir ye my masse-peny: thys ys my laste requeste.²²¹

While at one level this document is a love letter, at another it is a will, a text which actually requires publicity in order to function. The phrase 'make my mone', which sits oddly in this testamentary context, hints at one further reason for the public treatment of the letter. Though somewhat concealed, the letter also represents a request for justice from the knights of the Round Table - for public discussion and censure of Sir Lancelot's conduct. This layer, muted in Malory, is far more explicit in one of his most important sources, the thirteenth-century *La Mort le Roi Artu*:

A touz les chevaliers de la Table Reonde mande saluz la damoisele
d'Escalot. Je faz a vos touz ma complainte: non mie por ce que vos
le me puissiez amender jamés, mes por ce que ge vos con nois a la
plus preude gent del monde et a la plus envoisiee, vos faz ge savoir
tout plainement que por loiaument amer sui ge a ma fin venue.²²²

²¹⁹Ibid., p. 641, ll. 20-21.

²²⁰Ibid., p. 641, ll. 11-12.

²²¹Ibid., p. 641, ll. 13-15.

²²²Jean Frappier, ed., *La Mort Le Roi Artu, Roman du XIIIe Siècle* (Geneva, 1964), p. 89.

The letter of the Fair Maid of Astolat is published not because Malory drew no distinction between the reception of intimate and official letters. Indeed, the description of the letters exchanged between Sir Tristan and La Beale Isoud elsewhere in the same text suggests a private reading context similar to that seen in other texts of the period.²²³ Rather, the letter is read precisely because, contrary to first appearances, it is a text which falls into the category of 'curial' correspondence. The public treatment of this letter actually confirms the stability of the system of public/private distinctions established in other texts of the period.

Late medieval romances seem therefore to be consistent in their depiction silent reading as the preferred mode of reception for 'private' letters. Yet despite this, the accuracy of these texts as testimony of real practices must be treated with some scepticism. First, in many romances the relationship between the lovers is illicit; the exclusion of intermediaries is essential to the plot as much as to the tone of the stories.²²⁴ The second problem is more practical. Can we be confident that all fifteenth-century correspondents really possessed the skills necessary to read their own letters? In particular, can we be certain that women's reading ability would have been adequate to the task? Though scribal ability is regarded as a skill possessed by only a small number of women, female ownership of literary and religious manuscripts was comparatively common, and this has been understood as reflecting widespread reading ability.²²⁵ For example, Norman Davis argues of Anne Paston:

we cannot tell whether she was better able to write than her grandmother, mother, and sister-in-law; but she could presumably read, for she owned a copy of Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*, which she would hardly have acquired if it had been unintelligible unless read out to her.²²⁶

²²³Vinaver, ed., *Malory*, Book IX, pp. 316-17. See also letters sent by Guinever to Sir Lancelot, which are clearly intended to be read silently, Book X, p. 381. 'And so prevayly she sente the lettir unto sir Launcelot ... And as sir Launcelot slepte, [sir Dynadan] stole the lettir oute of his honde and rad hit worde by worde, and than he made grete sorow for angir. And sir Launcelot so wakened, and wente to a wyndowe and redde the letter agayne, whyche made hym angry.'

²²⁴See also below pp. 92-6 for further examples of adulterous affairs conducted by letter. It is certainly interesting to note that Constance in the *Man of Law's Tale* and Emarè, in the romance of the same name, are not depicted as reading letters from their husbands themselves.

²²⁵For a balanced discussion of the value of book ownership as evidence of reading ability, see Carol M. Meale, '... alle the bokes that I haue of latyn, englich and frensch': Laywomen and their books in late medieval England', in eadem, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 128-159.

²²⁶*PL*:I, p. xxxviii.

But even if women could read manuscripts of this kind, are we safe in assuming that they would also have been capable of reading letters? Discussing evidence of literacy in the sixteenth century, Keith Thomas has suggested that the modern dichotomy between literacy and illiteracy is inapplicable, for while some kinds of writing were widely legible, knowledge of others remained circumscribed:

The existence of all these different scripts meant that it was perfectly possible in the Tudor and early Stuart period for someone to be able to print fluently, but to be quite incapable of deciphering a written document. For the only people who could read script were the privileged minority who had themselves learned to write it.²²⁷

The same argument could usefully be applied to documents of the fifteenth century, in which a hierarchy of scripts had already emerged. Even if women could read psalters, or the formal book hands in which literary texts were usually written, it does not necessarily follow that they had the same facility with the highly abbreviated, and often roughly written, hands of letters [Plates 3, 9 and 10].

In fact, the question of whether silent reading was the preferred mode of reception for non-official letters in the fifteenth century does not depend solely on women's reading abilities. By the end of the fifteenth century many men, both merchants and aristocrats, must have shared the technical reading skills which appear to have been possessed by civic governors and kings.²²⁸ Yet it nevertheless remains far from clear that silent reading represented a *preferred* mode of textual reception in the 'private' arena any more than in the curial context. Discussing the period to 1307, Michael Clanchy makes the following assertion:

Whatever the language and whether the record was held solely in the bearer's memory or was committed to parchment, the medieval recipient prepared himself to listen to an utterance rather than to scrutinize a document visually as

²²⁷Thomas, 'The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern England', p. 100. The writing master David Brown's curriculum followed reading with learning to write and to read 'writ' or handwriting. In the words of David Cressy: 'Reading 'writ' or handwriting was distinguished from the easier reading of print.' Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order*, p. 23.

²²⁸Paul Saenger has noted that the books prepared for the French aristocracy in the fifteenth century were written in new scripts, which were easier for non-clerics to read than their predecessor, Gothic *textualis*. Saenger, 'Silent Reading', pp. 408-09. Above we noted that merchants' apprentices, such as Goddard Oxbrygge and William Cely, would have had little access to the kind of textual interpreters, such as chaplains and stewards, who were present to decipher correspondence in aristocratic households. This seems to be confirmed by Van Eyck's portraits, which show contemporary Flemish merchants reading letters in silent contemplation.

a modern literate would. *This was due to a different habit of mind; it was not because the recipient was illiterate in any sense of that word.*²²⁹

Evidence to the same effect has been adduced for later periods. For example, Joyce Coleman has demonstrated that, contrary to the beliefs of earlier scholars, romances continued to be consumed aurally in the fifteenth century, though audiences would often have had the capacity to read them silently by this date.²³⁰ Though somewhat scanty, there is also some direct evidence to suggest that 'auditing' letters was regarded as congenial by 'fully literate' individuals as late as the sixteenth century. The correspondence of More and Wolsey shows that Henry VIII often preferred to have his letters read to him, rather than to scan them visually.²³¹ Daybell refers to a letter of Elizabeth Russell in which she describes reading a letter aloud to Lord Burghley.²³² Concerns raised by writing masters in relation to privacy suggest the 'fully literate' would have read 'secret' letters silently rather than involving an intermediary.²³³ On the other hand, many individuals may have read day-to-day correspondence aloud even in the sixteenth century.

Reading aloud did not disappear at the close of the Middle Ages, or even at the end of the sixteenth century. I would suggest, however, that by the end of the latter period silent reading may have gained normative status, as the mode in which ordinary letters were interpreted in the home.²³⁴ Two bodies of evidence suggest this conclusion. The first is the apparent rise in female literacy; now that women were trained in writing, we can be

²²⁹Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, pp. 266-67.

²³⁰Joyce Coleman, 'Interactive Parchment: The Theory and Practice of Medieval English Auralness', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 25 (1995): 63-79.

²³¹Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 1: I, No. LXXXIII, p. 292. 'I redde unto his Grace the Lettres which it lyked your Grace to wryte to me.' See also Letter LXXXII, pp. 289-91.

²³²Daybell, 'Women's Letters', p. 272.

²³³See above p. 65.

²³⁴This is not to imply that reading aloud was abandoned as a mode of reception even at this point. Reading aloud remained important in many social situations into the seventeenth century and beyond. Harvey J. Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1987), pp. 117-19; Roger Chartier, 'Reading Matter and Popular Reading: From the Renaissance to the Seventeenth Century' in Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 269-83.

confident that their competence in reading was sufficient to permit them to read letters.²³⁵ As we have seen, historians of literacy, such as Saenger and Chaytor, have examined the internal organisation of texts - both linguistic and visual - in order to recover modes of reception. Though this has not been attempted heretofore, the same method can usefully be applied to the study of letter-texts. After c.1540 a number of features thought characteristic of silent reading begin to appear in vernacular missives. The first of these is a change in methods of punctuation. Saenger has located the transition to silent reading in Italy in the fourteenth century, on the basis of technical innovations seen in texts of this date:

Humanist scribes, building on late medieval and Byzantine precedents, evolved full syntactical sentence punctuation with the characteristically modern usage of the comma and periods. They integrated these punctuation markings with the syntactical patterns of late Gothic capitalization in order to achieve optimal conditions for silent reading.²³⁶

From the middle of the sixteenth century these methods of punctuation begin to be seen in English vernacular correspondence. A passage from one of Elizabeth I's letters to Edward VI, sent to accompany a portrait, reads, for example:

For thogh from the grace of the pictur the coulours may fade by time, may give by wether or be spotted by chance, yet the wether nor time with her swift winges shal overtake, nor the mistie cloudes with ther loweringes may darken, nor chance with ther slipery fate may overthrow...²³⁷

From the same date we find another, perhaps more significant shift. In section two above it was noted that the format of letters prescribed by the *dictatores* derived from classical teaching on oration, specifically pseudo-Cicero's *Ad Herennium*. Though this was undoubtedly due in part to the absence of classical doctrine on letters, it has also been attributed to the expectation that letters, like orations, would be presented orally.²³⁸ In the second half of the sixteenth century fixed divisions, and the stereotyped introductory phrases with which they were associated, were gradually abandoned in ordinary letters, in favour of a looser, more digressive style. Indeed, according to Erasmus such divisions were both

²³⁵For a fuller discussion of this point see the section which follows.

²³⁶Saenger, 'Silent Reading', p. 410.

²³⁷BL, MS Cotton Vespasian F. III, f. 20.

²³⁸Witt, 'Medieval 'Ars Dictaminis' and the Beginnings of Humanism', pp. 5-6.

unnecessary and undesirable:

if in legal pleading most of the arrangement is derived from judgment rather than from rules, this should apply much more in a letter *which is read, not heard* ... So it is a superstitious to practice to restrict the freedom of a letter by fixed divisions and to hold to in the kind of bondage that Quintilian does not recommend even for orations.²³⁹ ?

However, as we have already seen, in official letters, which continued to be read aloud, fixed divisions are retained into the seventeenth century and beyond.²⁴⁰

In both these cases change could, perhaps, be attributed to 'renovatio', the humanist project to revive classical habits, rather than to alterations in reading practices. However, in the same period two further alterations in practice are seen which do not find their origins in this movement. First, though the treatises of the *dictatores* are quite specific about the way in which the text of a letter should be structured, they do not generally specify its organisation on the page. During the sixteenth century, however, a concern with layout begins to appear. In his letter-writing manual 1582 Fulwood offers the following advice:

For to our superiour wee must write at the right side in the nether end of the paper ... And to our equals we must write towards the middest of the Paper, saying: By your faithful friend for euer, &c. Or, Yours assured &c. To our inferiours we may write on high at the left hand, saying By yours &c.²⁴¹

In fact, evidence of this type of concern can be seen in documents produced in the first half of the century, a period before manuals, with their humanist orientation, were available in England. In the Lisle letters, written between 1533 and 1540, writers sometimes leave a large gap between the letter-text and the signature when writing to addressees of significantly higher status.²⁴² [Plates 5, 6, 7 and 8] Similar precepts and practices appear can

²³⁹Erasmus, 'De conscribendis epistolis', ed. and trans. Fantazzi, p. 65.

²⁴⁰See above p. 29. According to Chaytor: 'An unlettered audience cannot be treated tenderly; points must be vigorously emphasised; statements must be repeated, variety of diction must be introduced.' Chaytor, *From Script to Print*, p. 55. A number of literary critics have understood the repetitive, emphatic style of some kinds of poetry as deriving from its oral function. For a useful summary and discussion of this literature see D. H. Green, 'Orality and Reading: The State of Research in Medieval Studies', *Speculum* 65 (1990): 267-86.

²⁴¹Fulwood, *Enimie of Idlenesse*, p. 4.

²⁴²See, for example, the letters of John Husee, servant to the Lisles, Public Record Office SP3/11/56-7 and SP3/11/62-3. A particularly clear contrast is evident between letters sent by Arthur, Viscount Lisle to Cromwell (SP3/1/35) and to his wife Honor (SP3/1/23).

also be observed in letters of the seventeenth century.²⁴³

A closely related development has already been mentioned: the growth of autography in sixteenth-century letters. On occasion the decision to write oneself appears to be pragmatic - it is chosen as a way of concealing the contents of the letter from the eyes of a secretary. Though this privacy might be expected to apply equally to reception, this need not necessarily be the case, particularly if one writer were abroad, while the addressee was at home, surrounded by trusted household servants. On other occasions, however, the decision to write in the author's hand would make no sense were the recipient indifferent to the visual form taken by the letter. In 1597 the young Anne Clifford composed an autograph letter of duty to her father. [Plate 4] Here the expectation of visual reception is underlined by the addition of decorations, which turn the letter from text to object.²⁴⁴ If reception were not at least partially visual, it would also be difficult to make sense of reproaches for failure to compose autograph letters, such as the following, from Gertrude Marchioness of Exeter to her son:

I have received your letter by Brown, the 8th of June, whereby I do perceive you be in good health, the which I am glad to hear of, but sorry to perceive you have so much business you have no leisure to write with you own hand to your own mother.²⁴⁵

Both Chaytor and Saenger have associated the organisation of text according to visual criteria as a sign of silent reading. By the seventeenth century habits of this kind seem to have become firmly entrenched in letters. By these measures too, then, the sixteenth century represents a point of transition away from recitation to the silent assimilation of letters.

From the fragments of evidence which have survived, some general conclusions seem

²⁴³For precept see Robertson, 'The Art of Letter-Writing', p. 15. For practice see the conventions used by the Verney family, described in Whyman, 'Paper visits': the post-Restoration letter', p. 17 and note 27. See the plates in Susan E. Whyman, *Sociability and Power in late-Stuart England: the Cultural Worlds of the Verneys, 1660-1720* (Oxford, 1999).

²⁴⁴Williamson, *Lady Anne Clifford*, Plate 43. See also the decorated letter sent by Alatheia Talbot to Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury in David N. Durant, *Bess of Hardwick: Portrait of an Elizabethan Dynast* (London, 1977), p. 217. See this thesis, plate 4.

²⁴⁵M. A. E. Wood, ed., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies of Great Britain*, 3 vols. (London, 1846):III, Letter CXLIII, p. 303.

possible. First, from the fourteenth century onwards, silent reading seems to have become available to an increasing number of individuals. Oral reading was not, however, immediately displaced by this new 'technology'. In political contexts oral reading continued to be widely practised as a way of fulfilling the constitutional duty to consult and inform. In other settings familiarity with listening as a mode of processing information, and a probable reluctance to educate women to a high level of competence (particularly in the reading of more difficult, business hands) probably acted to preserve oral reading as an important, if not dominant, mode of reception. Though this seems to locate the transition to silent reading in the sixteenth century, I suggest that the ultimate cause of this shift lies neither with humanism nor with printing. The consistency with which the reception of love letters is portrayed as silent and internalised in medieval romances suggests that an idea of epistolary privacy was established well before the early modern period. The factor which tipped the balance away from aural consumption is probably more pragmatic; in a society in which so many transactions were carried out through writing it was no longer practical for individuals (including women) to depend entirely on writing professionals. Once a thorough familiarity with written documents was achieved oral reading became a less attractive mode of consumption.

Women and Letters

As we saw in the introduction, the impetus behind much recent scholarship on letters has been a desire on the part of feminist writers to 'reclaim' female voices. Over the past decade a number of detailed studies have been produced, focussing for the most part on the letters of women living in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²⁴⁶ In some ways the periodisation of these studies reflects politics within the academy; New Historicist methods grew out of, and continue to be closely associated with, Renaissance studies.²⁴⁷ Yet the selection of the sixteenth century as a starting point for the examination of female-authored letters is not entirely arbitrary. The editor of the most convincing volume yet to appear on the 'female epistolary voice' argues, for example:

²⁴⁶For a list of these studies, see Introduction, p. 15 n. 49.

²⁴⁷Hunter Cadzow, 'New Historicism', in Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth, eds., *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Baltimore and London, 1994), pp. 534-39.

since the sixteenth century ... male commentators have noted that the epistolary genre seemed particularly suited to the female voice. Newly educated women could easily learn to write letters, and as epistolary theory became more adapted to worldly culture, women's letters began to be considered the best models of the genre.²⁴⁸

Goldsmith sees the association between women and letters as linked to the rise of the 'familiar letter' as a literary genre, and to the expansion of female writing ability, both of which she sees as sixteenth-century developments. Recently, however, scholars of the medieval period have begun to question these assumptions. In the most comprehensive work yet to be produced on medieval female epistolarity, Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus explicitly reject Goldsmith's reasoning, arguing that a tradition of female letter-writing existed throughout the Middle Ages, from the sixth century to the sixteenth:

Unlike learned treatises, letters have long been accessible to women because of the directness with which they convey ideas and emotions and because of the immediate availability of audience. Through letters, women who desired to write could bypass the need for formal education, literary patronage, editors, and publishers, and they often thus circumvented the censorship of a patriarchal literary industry.²⁴⁹

The idea that the letter was a genre which was peculiarly accessible to women has also been propounded by Albrecht Classen. In his most recent article, Classen argues:

it appears as if there had been hardly any literary media open to medieval women writers in secular German literature during the high and late Middle Ages ... Epistolarity, however, appears to have been the most convenient and appropriate form of 'literary' expression for women among the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, whether they aimed at creating a literary text by way of a letter, or whether they were 'only' fascinated with writing as such.²⁵⁰

A survey of the letters actually produced in the period would seem the logical starting point for an investigation of the orientation of women to letters in the fifteenth century. As we shall see, however, the evidence of surviving texts is extremely difficult to interpret in

²⁴⁸Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, 'Introduction', pp. vii-xii in eadem, ed., *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature* (Boston, 1989), at p. vii.

²⁴⁹Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, 'Introduction: Women Writing Letter in the Middle Ages', in eadem, eds., *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia, 1993), pp. 1-20 at p.1.

²⁵⁰Albrecht Classen, 'Female Explorations of Literacy: Epistolary Challenges to the Literary Canon in the Late Middle Ages', *Disputatio* 1 (1996):89-123 at p. 92. See also idem, 'Female Epistolary Literature from Antiquity to the Present: An Introduction', *Studia Neophilologica* 60 (1988):3-13.

isolation. Before attempting to decipher the patterns present in this material we will therefore examine the broader cultural context. Let us therefore begin with the largest and most coherent body of literary representations of female letter-writing, Ovid's *Heroides*.²⁵¹ In later medieval England, most readers would have come into contact with this material through the interpretations offered by Chaucer in *The Legend of Good Women* and by Gower in the *Confessio Amantis*. Christine de Pisan considered Ovid a misogynist writer, and in the *Ars Amatoria* the relationship between women and letters is portrayed negatively; young girls are shown using their power to write to realise their sexual designs:

With as many watchers around you as Argus had eyes
 You'll outsmart them all. Can a guard stop you writing letters
 When you're shut in the bathroom? Will he find
 All the places where your girl-accomplice can hide them - tablets
 Snugly tucked in her bra
 A package of papers strapped to one calf, a seductive message
 Slipped between sandal and foot?²⁵²

Medieval commentators believed, however, that the *Heroides* to had been written as a corrective to the licentious *Ars Amatoria*; the work was understood not simply as moral, but as intentionally positive in its attitude towards women.²⁵³ Perhaps inspired by this story, Chaucer also positioned his text as a philo-feminist work. In the Prologue of the *Legend*, Queen Alceste instructs the narrator to do penance for his earlier defamation of women by devoting his labours to the praise of wronged heroines:

Thow shalt, while that thow livest, yer by yere,
 The most partye of thy tyme spende
 In makyng of a glorious legende
 Of goode women, maydenes and wyves,
 That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves...²⁵⁴

²⁵¹In France translations had made the original text available to lay audiences by the fifteenth century. See Yvonne LeBlanc, 'Queen Anne in the Lonely, Tear-Soaked Bed of Penelope: Rewriting the *Heroides* in Sixteenth-Century France', *Disputatio* 1 (1996): 71-87 at pp. 71-73.

²⁵²Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, ed. and trans, Rosalind Brown-Grant (Harmondsworth, 1999), p. 20 ; 'How Girls Outsmart Guardians: The Art of Love, III. 618-52', in Alcuin Blamires, ed., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford, 1992), p. 20.

²⁵³Alastair Minnis, 'Moral Gower' and Medieval Literary Theory', in A.J. Minnis, ed., *Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments* (Woodbridge and New Jersey, 1983), pp. 50-79 at p. 59.

²⁵⁴Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Benson, G Prologue, ll. 481-75. Hereafter referred to as LGW.

Some critics have argued that Chaucer's 'philo-feminist' stance is satirical.²⁵⁵ But even if this specific charge is discounted, it nevertheless remains difficult (particularly for the modern reader) to view these works as presenting a positive view of female epistolarity. With the exception of Penelope's missive (included by Gower but not Chaucer) the letters in these texts seem to symbolise the degradation of women rather than their empowerment. Like the act of suicide itself, the composition of letters is a desperate response to the loss of patriarchal protection. Indeed, in Gower's version of the tale of Canace and Machaire, epistolarity and mortality seem almost to be ellided. The heroine's letter concludes:

Now at this time, as thou schalt wite,
With teres and with enke write
This lettre I have in cares colde:
In my riht hond my Penne I holde,
And in my left the swerd I kepe.²⁵⁶

For these women words, and the possibility of violence against their own bodies, are the only instruments with which they can avenge their wrongs. Both carry a powerful, yet ultimately pessimistic charge.

Another objection to viewing the Heroidean epistles as offering positive models for real medieval letter-writers might be another factor - their alterity. Gower uses the Heroidean stories as moral exemplars. In Chaucer's legends too the women appear to be firmly positioned as literary constructs, as part of an ongoing discussion about topoi of femininity, rather than about real women.²⁵⁷ In the Prologue, the God of Love demands of the narrator:

Ne in alle thy bokes ne coudest thou nat fynde
Som story of wemen that were goode and
trewe?
Yis, God wot, sixty bokes olde and newe
Hast thou thyself, alle ful of storyes grete,
That bothe Romayns and ek Grekes trete.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁵H. C. Goddard, 'Chaucer's Legend of Good Women', *Journal of English and German Philology* 7 (1908):101.

²⁵⁶John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, EETS e.s. 81 and 82 (1901):I, p. 234. *Liber Tercius*, ll. 297-301.

²⁵⁷Florence Percival, *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 328.

²⁵⁸LGW, G Prologue, ll. 271-76.

Closely connected, and equally evident in this passage, is the pervasive sense of the cultural distance separating the legendary women from the reader in Chaucer's interpretation. In illustrations in the French Heroidean manuscripts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the heroines are dressed in contemporary costume, as though they had lived in the lifetime of the translator. In Chaucer's interpretation, however, the reader is repeatedly reminded of the exotic otherness of the world from which the stories are drawn. The God of Love, in the Prologue, draws the narrator's attention to the status of the women as 'hethene'.²⁵⁹ In describing the suicide of Lucrece, Chaucer stops to offer an explanatory historical note to the reader:

These Romeyns wyves lovede so here name
At thilke tyme, and dredde so the shame,
That, what for fer of sclaunder and drede of deth,
She loste bothe at ones wit and breth.²⁶⁰

The idea that the authorship of women is a key part of the 'exoticism' of these tales finds support in a comparison between this text and another, set in a more recognisably 'medieval' past. The death scene of Elaine in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* is closely akin to the *Heroidean* tales in outline. As we saw above, in despair of her life, the Fair Maid decides to pen a final letter to her would-be lover, in which she will expose his heartlessness to public judgement. At this point, however, Malory departs from the Ovidian model. In the *Heroides* women take up their own pens. Elaine, by contrast, seeks male assistance:

And than she called hir fadir, sir Bernarde, and hir brothir, sir Tirry, and hartely she prayd hir fadir that hir brothir myght wryght a lettir lyke as she ded endite, and so hir fadir granted her. And whan the lettir was wryten, worde by worde lyke as she devised hit, than she prayde hir fadir that she myght be wacched untylle she were [dede].²⁶¹

The contrast between this scene of composition and those found in the Ovidian tales might be attributed to differences in literary conventions rather than in gender politics. Yet it is interesting to note the difference in the portrayal of Elaine's death and that of Sir Gawain

²⁵⁹LGW, Prologue G, l. 299.

²⁶⁰LGW, Legend V, ll. 1812-15.

²⁶¹Vinaver, ed., *Malory*, Book XVIII, p. 640.

in the same text. Having been mortally wounded in the battle against Mordred, Sir Gawain determines to write one final letter to Sir Launcelot, begging his forgiveness for their quarrel. Though weaker physically than Elaine, and though assistance is readily available to him, Sir Gawain nevertheless insists on writing the letter in his own hand:

So whan pauper, penne and inke was brought, than sir Gawayne was sette up waykely by kynge Arthure, for he was shryven a lytyll afore. And than he toke hys penne and wrote thus...²⁶²

Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* can hardly be understood as a direct mirror of its times. But however much mythologised, the setting of the story is intended for the Christian medieval past, rather than that of pagan antiquity. The denial of access to writing to the lady, but not the knight, thus seems to trouble Cherewatuk and Wiethaus's easy assumption that letters were a genre to which women had unproblematic access in the medieval period. A broader review of later medieval literature seems further to undermine such an optimistic interpretation. In romances, women's letter-writing is repeatedly associated with one of two distinct themes. The first is sexual transgression, particularly adultery. The most familiar example of this trope is May, in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*. May does not instigate the affair with Damyan, but her response to his advances is rapid and enthusiastic:

This gentil May, fulfilled of pitee,
Right of hire hand a lettre made she,
In which she graunteth hym hire verray grace.
Ther lakketh noight oonly but day and place.²⁶³

Not only do May's epistolary abilities allow the continuation of the affair in spite of her husband's vigilance, but as Stanbury has noted, it is Damyan who has to borrow a penner, perhaps suggesting that duplicitous literacy comes more readily to women than to men.²⁶⁴

Two other romances enlarge on this possibility. *The Seven Sages of Rome* recounts the tale of a lady confined to a tower by her jealous husband, so that she may converse with 'nether clerke nor knyght'. The lady nevertheless successfully initiates an adulterous sexual liaison

²⁶²Vinaver, ed., *Malory*, Bk. XXI, pp. 709-10.

²⁶³Chaucer, *The Merchant's Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Benson, ll. 1995-98.

²⁶⁴Sarah Stanbury, 'Women's Letters and Private Space in Chaucer', *Exemplaria* 6 (1994): 271-85, at p. 283.

by throwing a love letter out of her window to an amorous knight who stands below:

The knyght toke the letter anon
 And vndyd hit and lokyd there on.
 He hadde wounder whoo hit threwe,
 But there by the lady he knewe,
 And that he shulde with hyr play
 For any thyng that any man couthe say.²⁶⁵

Equally lubricious is Queen Candace, in *King Alisaunder*, a romance written in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth-century. Candace's letter shows a combination of sensuality and materialism calculated to appal the moral sensibilities of a medieval audience:

O Alisaundre dure sire
Ouer alle men Y þe desyre
 Tak me fore alle to þy qwene
 Riche schal þy mede beone²⁶⁶

As in the Anglo-Norman source, the *Roman de toute chevalrie*, the letter is the means by which Candace lures Alexander to her court, leading to the deception and sexual subjugation of the military hero.²⁶⁷

The second theme which relates to female epistolarity is equally negative; here female writing is used to usurp or misappropriate male power. In the thirteenth-century *Le Roman de Silence*, for example, Queen Eufeme makes sexual advances to the page Silence. Rebuffed, she denounces the page to her husband. The king determines that the he/she will be exiled to the court of the king of France, but dismayed by the lightness of the sentence Eufeme steals the letter of recommendation and substitutes another, written herself, condemning the bearer to death:

De par roi Ebayn, son segnor,
 Escrit al roi de France un brief
 ...

²⁶⁵Karl Brunner, ed., *The seven sages of Rome*, EETS o.s. 191 (1933), E text, ll. 2991-96, p. 146. This manuscript dates from the fifteenth century.

²⁶⁶G. V. Smithers, ed., *Kyng Alisaunder*, EETS o.s. 227 (London, 1952), ll. 5413-14, p. 354

²⁶⁷As discussed in Martin Camargo, 'The Metamorphosis of Candace and the Earliest English Love Epistle', in Glyn S. Burgess, ed., *Court and Poet* (Liverpool, 1981), pp. 101-11.

Cest brief a roïne escrit.
Mar l'a cil eü en despit.²⁶⁸

In the Constance legend, different versions of which are found in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and the fifteenth-century romance *Emaré*, letters exchanged between the heroine and her husband are stolen and substituted for forgeries written by a jealous mother-in-law. In Chaucer's version the gendered nature of the transgression is emphasised not just thematically, but lexically:

O Donegild, I ne have noon Englissh digne
Unto thy malice and thy tirannye!
And therefore to the feend I thee resigne;
Lat hym enditen of thy traitorie!
Fy mannysh, fy!²⁶⁹

For Benson 'mannysh' here means not just 'unwomanly', or 'lacking in female virtue', but refers to the unnatural usurpation of male authority implicit in Donegild's act of forgery.²⁷⁰

The fictive, and in some cases comic, nature of these tales of adultery might lead one to posit a clear distinction between textual ideas of female epistolarity and on the one hand, and the practices current in contemporary society on the other. Any attempt to impose a clear distinction between 'art' and 'life', is, however, troubled by a noticeable overlap of concerns between romances and contemporary courtesy texts. The general disapproval of female literacy in *The Dicts and Sayings of the Philosophers* and in *The Boke of the Knight of the Tower* is widely noted by commentators.²⁷¹ Less well-known is the specific hostility to female letter-writing found in later medieval prescriptive texts. In the thirteenth-century moral treatise *Les Quatre Ages de l'Homme* Philip of Navarre seeks to confine women's competence to needlework, for to offer access to letter-writing is to invite disaster:

A fame ne doit on apanre letres ne escrire, se ce n'est especiaument por estre

²⁶⁸Thorpe, ed., *Le roman de Silence*, p. 173.

²⁶⁹Chaucer, *The Man of Law's Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer* ed. Benson, ll. 778-82.

²⁷⁰Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 861.

²⁷¹The Knight of the Tower states that 'somme folke sayne that they wold not that theyr wyues ne doughters wust no thyng of clergie ne of wrytyng' and advocates that only reading be taught to women. M. Y. Offord, ed., *William Caxton: The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, EETS s.s. 2 (1971), Chapter 84, p. 122.

nonnain; car par lire et escrire de fame sont maint mal avenu. Car tieus li osera baillier ou anvoier letres ... qu'il n'oserait proier ne dire de bouche, ne par message mander. Et ja n'eüst ele nul talant de mal faire, li deables est si soutis et entendanz a faire pechier, que tost la metroit en corage que eles lise les letres, et li face respons.²⁷²

In a courtesy text dating from the following century similar ideas emerge. In the *Menagier de Paris* writing is not entirely forbidden. However, here too the perceived link between female writing and adultery is determinant. The advice to a wife, significantly offered in a section entitled 'To keep continence and life chastely', reads as follows:

Si vous conseille que lettres amouresuse et secretes de vostre mary vous les recevez en grant joye et reverence, et secretement tout seule les lisez tout apart vous, et toute seule lui rescripvez de vostre main se vous savez, ou par la main d'autre bien secrette personne ... et nulle autres lettres ne recevez ne ne lisiez, ne ne rescripvez a autre personne, fors par estrange main, et devant chascun et en publique les faites lire...²⁷³

Scholars have sometimes argued that the use of secretaries by men in this period meant that women's resort to dictation gave them equal access to literacy.²⁷⁴ The *Menagier's* treatment seems to contradict this view. Men might use dictation or write themselves, as skill and convenience allowed. For women, on the other hand, dictation was prescribed by modesty as much as by necessity. Even if they could write, women should dictate, for writing should at all times be supervised and validated by patriarchal authority.

In *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, Christine de Pizan's 'part etiquette book, part survival manual' we might expect to see rather more positive advice on letter-writing for women.²⁷⁵ Indeed, of all late medieval authors, Christine de Pizan would seem the obvious

²⁷²Philippe de Navarre *Les Quatre Ages de l'Homme*, ed. and trans., Marcel de Freville, *Société des Anciens Textes Français* 28 (1888), pp. 16-17.

²⁷³Brereton and Ferrier, eds., *Le Menagier de Paris*, p. 56. 'And I counsel you that you receive with great joy and reverence the loving and private letters of your husband, and secretly and all alone read them unto yourself, and all alone write again unto him with you own hand, if you know how, or by the hand of another very privy person... and receive not nor read any other letters, nor write unto no other person, save by another's hand and in another's presence, and cause them to be read in public.' Power, ed. and trans., *The Goodman of Paris*, pp. 106.

²⁷⁴Diane Watt, 'No Writing for Writing's Sake': The Language of Service and Household Rhetoric in the Letters of the Paston Women', in Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, eds., *Dear Sister*, pp. 122-39, p. 124.

²⁷⁵James Daybell understands this letter as a straightforward model. Daybell, 'Women and Women's Letters',

proponent of female epistolarity: Christine famously used letters to defend women in the 'Quarrel of the Rose' and to argue for peace in the *Epistle to the Queen*.²⁷⁶ *The Epistle of Othea*, a literary work in epistolary form, was available in a number of translations in fifteenth-century England.²⁷⁷ Her attitude towards the non-literary letters which her readers might seek to write is rather different, however. The text contains no defence of female literacy. Even in the section 'How ladies.. who live on their manors ought to manage their households and estates', which emphasises the skills required by those whose husbands are often absent, no reference is made to letters. The one discussion of female letters which does appear seems to offer an explanation, and a sinister one at that. To the section 'Of the young high-born lady who wants to plunge into a foolish love-affair' a model letter is appended, in which a female chaperon attempts to persuade her charge to chastity. Christine's discussion, like that of the *Menagier*, seems premised on the idea that the reader will instinctively associate female epistolarity with adultery.²⁷⁸ Though the presentation of a virtuous letter from a female pen may be intended to counter such assumptions, it does so within highly conservative limits. Christine advises the would-be writer:

She will write these or similar words in a letter, or she will dictate them to a priest very secretly in confession. Then she will have the priest deliver the letter.²⁷⁹

For Christine herself letters may be a way of appropriating authority, or of circumventing that of male contemporaries. For ordinary women, however, she presents letter-writing as an activity that remains fraught with danger. Like the romance heroines Constance, Emaré and Elaine, ordinary medieval women should avoid even the appearance of impropriety; as

p. 58.

²⁷⁶For Christine as a letter-writer see Earl Jeffrey Richards, 'Seulette a part' - 'The Little Woman on the Sidelines' Takes up her Pen: The Letters of Christine de Pizan', in Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, eds., *Dear Sister*, pp. 137-70 and Nadia Margolis, 'The Cry of the Chameleon': Evolving Voices in the Epistles of Christine de Pizan', *Disputatio* 1 (1996): 37-70.

²⁷⁷One of the translators, Stephen Scrope, was an associate of the Pastons. Curt F. Bühler, ed., *The Epistle of Othea*, EETS o.s. 264 (1970), pp. xi-xviii.

²⁷⁸Indeed, the letter reproduced here is excerpted from Christine's *Le livre du duc des vrais amants*, in which a lady who exchanges letters with a lover is finally disgraced, though her love is shown to be both sincere and honourable.

²⁷⁹Christine de Pisan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, trans. Sarah Lawson (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 99.

in those texts, so in life, letters are best mediated through male authority.

Though a step closer to practice than the romances which we have examined, courtesy texts nevertheless represent at best an idealised view of contemporary conduct. Might letter-writing have been freer of constraints than these texts suggest, or does internal evidence confirm the view that women's literacy was systematically mediated? If we begin with the mercantile context to which the *Menagier* addresses himself, the consensus of opinion appears comparatively positive. Sylvia Thrupp has suggested that literacy, albeit of a fairly pragmatic kind, was a vocational prerequisite for all individuals of merchant level, including women.²⁸⁰ Caroline Barron has put 'flesh on the bones' of this argument, demonstrating the extent of book ownership amongst urban women, and suggesting that it is only the chance absence of documentation relating to 'dame schools' and the poor survival of apprentice indentures, which account for the sparseness of firm evidence of female literacy at this social level.²⁸¹ These comparatively optimistic assessments of female literacy seem supported by the evidence of the letters of Elizabeth Stonor, daughter of a London mayor, and first wife of an alderman of the same city. Elizabeth not only signs her own letters, but often writes autograph postscripts of some length. [Plate 9] Yet, the suggestion that women were capable of writing seems only to strengthen the suspicion that social conventions of some kind existed, barring the way to independent female composition. For, where men of merchant status routinely penned their own letters, no women of this group appear to have written letters entirely in their own hands.²⁸² None of Elizabeth Stonor's letters to her husband are autograph. Whether or not she was physically capable, the mercer Thomas Betson had no expectation that his fiancée, Katherine Ryche, would write letters to him herself. To her mother he complains:

I am wrothe with Katheryne, by cause she sendith me no writtynge: I have to hir diverse tymes, and ffor lacke off answeere I wax wery: she myght gett a secretary, yff she wold, and yff she will nat it shall putt me to lesse labour to

²⁸⁰Sylvia L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Ann Arbor, 1947), pp. 169-70.

²⁸¹Barron, 'The Education and Training of Girls', pp. 139-53.

²⁸²Of the two female-authored letters to survive in the Cely collection one is written by a professional scribe, the other is in an indeterminate hand. Hanham thinks that Margery Cely's letter is autograph, but this is questioned by O'Mara. *CL*, pp. 262 and 291; V. M. O'Mara, 'Female Scribal Ability and Scribal Activity in Late Medieval England: The Evidence?' *Leeds Studies in English* n.s. 27 (1996): 87-110, at p. 92.

answere hir lettres agayn.²⁸³

Not until Sabine Johnson, in the mid-sixteenth century, do we find evidence of a woman of merchant status writing her own letters; these are written in a hand noticeably less expert than that of the male correspondents in the same collection.²⁸⁴

The evidence which we have for writers of this group is comparatively slight. For the aristocracy our information is much stronger. In the past it has been argued that the dictation of letters, a practice widely practised at this social level, equalised the relationship of men and women to literacy. Closer examination reveals this perception to be oversimplified, however. Where dictation appears to have been used frequently by gentlemen in first half of the fifteenth century, the generation attaining maturity in the latter part of the century appear routinely to have written letters in their own hands. Like their urban counterparts, some gentlewomen possessed graphic ability, albeit of a modest kind. Margery Paston wrote short autograph postscripts to some of their letters, for example, and Anne Stonor signed her letter to her husband in what has been described as 'a good clear hand' [Plate 10].²⁸⁵ Yet, like merchant women, daughters of the gentry were significantly slower to take up their own pens than their menfolk. None of the letters of gentlewomen in the Stonor letters appear to be completely autograph, and the letters of only one female writer in the Paston correspondence are even tentatively identified as such.²⁸⁶

For women of the greater aristocracy the evidence is slightly different. From the last quarter of the fifteenth century and first years of the sixteenth a handful of complete autograph letters do survive. When we examine these closely, however, they tend to confirm the

²⁸³ *SL*, No. 185, p. 284.

²⁸⁴ According to Barbara Winchester, the editor of these letters '[Sabine] has a candid, open hand, but she can never quite manage to keep the lines straight on the paper, and so she always ends up higher on the right side than on the left. Her spelling is all her own ... John's tuition, however, and a few years of constant practice improved her writing out of all measure, although she never achieved Olivia's 'sweet Roman hand'.' *Tudor Family Portrait*, p. 68

²⁸⁵ O'Mara, 'Female Scribal Ability', p. 94.

²⁸⁶ 'Hand unidentified: the same as in Elisabeth Clere's other letters ... which suggests that it may be her own, but it seems too regular and practised for this to be likely.' *PL:II*, p. 31

impression created by the evidence drawn from the lower social spheres. Of the five writers in our sample, four display highly erratic orthography: Lora Butler writes 'rembyr' for 'remember'; Elizabeth, duchess of Suffolk gives 'four' as 'foro'[Plate 11]. The daughters of Henry VII are both highly idiosyncratic in their usage.²⁸⁷ For example, Margaret writes to Lord Dacre 'I have seen zour vryteng and ondarstande at length, and I parcauwe that ze ar nought sykerly informyd in what stat I stand in'.²⁸⁸ These four writers also display uncertainty in the formation of their letters. From this period only Margaret Beaufort, often referred to as an unusually well-educated woman for the period, writes with any degree of fluency [Plate 12].²⁸⁹ All five writers were capable of writing letters. However, they had not received an education which made letter-writing possible as a normal everyday activity.

The Sixteenth Century

The broader cultural context of letter-writing in the sixteenth century displays a number of continuities with the preceding period. Though no longer quite as popular as in the late Middle Ages, the tale of Constance, with its depiction of the letter-forging mother-in-law, continues to be found.²⁹⁰ The story of Criseyde's epistolary perfidy was also widely known; indeed in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* the story is given a new, Heroidean twist, as the leperous heroine, close to death, laments her fate:

O ladyis fair of Troy and Grece, attend
 My miserie, quhilk nane may comprehend,
 My frivoll fortoun, my infelicitie,
 My greit mischeif, quhilk na man can amend.²⁹¹

²⁸⁷PRO, SC1/51/145; PL:II, No. 798, p. 442. The latter is said by Davis to in an 'unpractised hand, probably autograph'.

²⁸⁸Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 1:I, No. XLV, p. 127. Mary's spelling was slightly better than that of her sister but still lacked accomplishment. See *Ibid.*, No. XLIII, pp.123-25 at p. 124 'I shale to the beste of my powr dowryng my lyfe endver myselfe as ferre as in me shale be possyble to do the thyng that shale stonde with your playsowr'.

²⁸⁹Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 1:I, No. XXII, pp. 46-48; PRO, SC1/51/189.

²⁹⁰T. Alsoppe, *The Breuyate and shorte Tragycall hystorie of the fayre Custance the Emperours daughter of Rome* (London, c.1525).

²⁹¹Robert L. Kindrick, ed., 'The Testament of Cresseid', in *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (Kalamazoo, 1997), ll. 452-455. See also Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*.

In the plays of Shakespeare, as in medieval romances, women are shown exploiting autograph letters to deceive men. In *As You Like It* the shepherdess Phebe sends her suitor to Rosalind with a 'taunting' letter. In reality, the letter contains a declaration of love:

He that brings this love to thee
 Little knows this love in me;
 And by him seal up thy mind,
 Whether that thy youth and kind
 Will the faithful offer take
 Of me and all that I can make.²⁹²

In *Twelfth Night* Maria forges a love letter from her mistress Olivia to her steward Malvolio.²⁹³ When he acts on the instructions which he believes he has received from Olivia, the unfortunate steward is branded a madman and imprisoned.

Some important differences are nevertheless evident between the romances of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the stories of deception found in the sixteenth-century plays. Where in the medieval texts forgery has serious consequences - enforced exile and sexual betrayal - in the plays no-one comes to any serious harm. Indeed, the tone throughout is light. Phebe's deception of Silvius is cruel but also comic; the object of her affection is a woman, who cannot possibly return her love. This deception represents just one misjudgement in a play whose theme is the foolishness of lovers, both male and female. The forgery in *Twelfth Night* is still more difficult to interpret as a demonstration of the dangers of female literacy. Maria does not use her ability to forge her mistress's hand in order to usurp her authority, or even to forward her own ambitions; rather her aim is to punish the material and erotic presumption of a man, Malvolio. Less noticeable, but just as important, is the implication in this play that female letter-writing is a normal and acceptable part of everyday life. Maria is sufficiently familiar with her mistress's hand to be able to imitate it; Malvolio believes himself to be able to recognise it.²⁹⁴ Indeed, portrayals of female letter-

²⁹²William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* in P. Alexander, ed., *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (London and Glasgow, 1951), Act IV, iii, ll. 55-61.

²⁹³William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, in *ibid.*, Act II, iii, ll. 145-51.

²⁹⁴*Ibid.*, Act II, iii, ll. 150-51 'I can write very much like my lady, your niece, on a forgotten matter we can hardly make distinction of our hands' and Act II, v, ll. 80-82 'By my life, this is my lady's hand: these be her very C's, her U's, and her T's; and thus makes she her great P's. It is, in contempt of question, her hand.'

writing as normal, or even positive, outnumber those which carry even a slightly negative charge. In *Pericles*, for example, Thaisa informs her father of her desire to marry the hero by letter; both the desire and the mode of expression are interpreted as legitimate, even commendable, within the value-system of the play.²⁹⁵ In *All's Well That Ends Well* letters from the heroine and the hero's mother contribute to the story's happy resolution.

Contrary to the contention of some recent writers, I would argue that prescriptive writers of the sixteenth century also propound a view of female epistolarity significantly different to that found in medieval texts. Recent writers have tended to emphasise the *limits* placed on female education by authors such as Vives and Salter.²⁹⁶ One writer remarks, for example:

Thomas Salter's advice that women should focus their talents on needlework rather than writing could be said to typify conservative early modern attitudes to what constituted an appropriate realm for women's activities.²⁹⁷

However, closer examination of these texts shows that, in contrast to medieval writers, few sixteenth-century authors sought to deny women an education in writing as a matter of principle. Thus Vives, in his influential *Instructions of a Christen Woman*, does not state that a woman should not be literate, but rather that the subject matter of both reading and writing should be appropriately virtuous:

Whan she shalbe taught to rede, let those bookes be taken in hande, that may teche good maners. And whan she shall lerne to wryte, let nat her example be voyde verses, nor wanton or tryflynge songes, but some sad sentence, prudent and chaste, taken out of scripture ...²⁹⁸

²⁹⁵William Shakespeare, *Pericles*, in Alexander, ed., *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, Act II, v, ll. 40-45 and ll. 70-71.

²⁹⁶Hilda Smith states that the work of Vives more than any other 'established the parameters of women's learning in the first half of the sixteenth century'. Hilda A. Smith, 'Humanist Education and the Renaissance Concept of Woman', in Helen Wilcox, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain, 1500-1700* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 9-29 at p. 16.

²⁹⁷Suzanne Trill, Kate Chedgzoy and Melanie Osborne, eds., *Lay by your Needles Ladies, Take the Pen: Writing Women in England, 1500-1700* (New York, 1997), p. 3. See also the pessimistic conclusion drawn by Wiesner 'Thus not only in the realm of basic literacy did the gap between male and female education grow in the sixteenth century, but at the level of higher education, particularly literacy in Latin and familiarity with the classics, it became a chasm.' Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 132.

²⁹⁸Richard Hyrde (trans.) J.L. Vives, *The Instructions of a Christen Woman* (1530) in Trill, Chedgzoy and Osborne, eds., *Lay by your Needles*, p. 27.

Salter, in his *Mirrhoe of Modestie*, takes a similar view. Parents should not extend the education of their daughter to comprehend the 'humaine artes', for the business of the woman is to govern family and household not the public realm. Neither should women be taught 'the skill of well using a penne or wrighting a loftie veerce with diffame and dishonour'. Yet neither reading nor writing are directly prohibited, as they had been by medieval writers such as Philippe of Navarre.

Implicitly these authors are happy for women to write, if the products of their skill are both chaste and 'domestic'. In three texts of the period letters are directly identified as documents which fall within these parameters. In *The English Schoole-Maister*, a manual designed to teach principles of reading and writing, Edmund Coote gives guidance in correct writing; this is offered to all who had been denied access to such knowledge in the past, including women:

and the same profit doe I offer unto all other both men & women, that now for want hereof are ashamed to write unto their best friends: for which I have heard many gentlewomen offer much.²⁹⁹

In his treatise *Positions*, first printed in 1581, Richard Mulcaster also defends the practice of teaching women to write. In so doing he more explicitly contests the views of earlier authorities:

As for writing, though it be discommoded for some private carriages (wherein we men also, no less than women bear oftentimes blame, if that were a sufficient exception why we should not learn to write) it hath this commodity where it filleth in mutch, and helps to enrich the good man's mercery. Many good occasions are oftentimes offered, where it were better for them to have the use of the pen for the good that comes by it, than to wish they had it when the default is felt: and for fear of evil, which cannot be avoided in some, to avert that good which may be commodious to many.³⁰⁰

Here Mulcaster acknowledges the perceived link between female epistolarity and adultery, but only to deny its legitimacy. Women are no more likely to use private letters to nefarious ends than men; the unreliability of some wives should not be used as a reason to debar all women from writing. A final authority goes still further. Martin Billingsley, a writing master

²⁹⁹Edmund Coote, *The English Schoole-Maister 1596* (reprint, Menston, 1968)

³⁰⁰Kate Aughterson, ed., *Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook* (London, 1995), p. 180.

of the early seventeenth century, proposes two reasons for teaching women to read. The first is similar to that recommended by Mulcaster; economic utility.³⁰¹ The second argument, that if women can write 'the secrets that are and ought to be between a Man and Wife ... in either of their absence may be confined to their owne privacy' is still more telling.³⁰² This statement reiterates the desire for privacy expressed by the *Menagier*; here, however, this wish seems to be quite free of concerns about sexual reputation.³⁰³ For the *Menagier*, marital letters were the only context in which autography was acceptable. For Billingsley it is simply the most important of many situations in which women might write for themselves.

As with the fifteenth century, both literary images and prescriptive texts would be of limited value as evidence, were they contradicted by material evidence of letter-writing practices. Yet, as in the previous century, a clear correlation can, in practice, be observed between these different kinds of testimony. As we saw above, in the fifteenth century there is little evidence to show that letter-writing was part of the ordinary education of women; indeed, the few autograph letters which do exist suggest a lack of instruction in the epistolary arts. In the sixteenth century many women continued to lack the competence to write letters themselves. For example, the letters which Christian Thynne sent to her husband in the early 1560s seem to have been written by the family steward, Harvard Brouham.³⁰⁴ Anne Bacon's missives to members of her family were drafted in her husband's hand.³⁰⁵ By the second half of the century, however, women who were actually incapable of penning their own letters appear to have been in the minority. James Daybell, who has undertaken a quantitative analysis of women's letter-writing in the sixteenth century, concludes:

³⁰¹[T]he practise of this Art [writing] is so necessary for woman, and consequently so excellent, that no woman surviving her husband, and who hath on estate left her, ought to be without the use thereof, at least in some reasonable manner...' Martin Billingsley, *The Pen's Excellencie or the Secretaries Delight* (London, 1618), C3-3v.

³⁰²*Ibid.*, p. 35.

³⁰³The *Menagier* stops short of recommending that women should be taught to write for the purpose of corresponding with the husband, suggesting 'rescripvez de vostre main *se vous savez*, ou par la main d'autre bien secrette personne': Brereton and Ferrier, eds, *Menagier de Paris*, p. 56.

³⁰⁴BL, Microfilm 904/1, vol. 1, f. 133-39, 146. (1559-64).

³⁰⁵*NBL*:I, p. xix. 'He undoubtedly drafted Anne's letters because of her lack of education, but in so doing he enriched his muniment room with both sides of some intimate family correspondence.'

In real terms ... the number of women for whom there is evidence of their actually writing letters rose from 50 per cent in the 1540s to some 79 per cent by the end of the sixteenth century. In addition, the proportion of women for whom no holograph letters survive fell from 28 per cent in the first decade of the period to an estimated 17 percent by the years 1600 to 1609.³⁰⁶

These figures tally closely with the qualitative evidence from the period. The Lisle letters show that as late as the 1530s training in writing was not regarded as a crucial aspect of aristocratic education for women [Plate 13].³⁰⁷ By the closing decades of the sixteenth century, by contrast, writing skills seem to be regarded as an important component in the training of both noble and gentle daughters. For example, such skills feature prominently in the list of accomplishments which Jane Tuttoft hoped her daughter would acquire in the household of her cousin, Nathaniel Bacon:

Let her lern to wryt & rede, & to cast account, & to wash, & to bru, & to backe, & to dres meat & drink, & so I trust she shal prove a great good huswyf.³⁰⁸

In her memoirs the gentlewoman Grace Mildmay recalls being taught to write letters in her childhood; as we have seen, Lady Anne Clifford was literate by the time she was ten [Plate 4].³⁰⁹ In many families changes in attitudes to female education can be observed in the contrasting abilities of different generations of women. As we have seen, Anne Bacon seems not to have been literate; her daughters, by contrast, benefited from a school education and were accomplished penwomen.³¹⁰ Grace, countess of Shrewsbury and Christian Thynne sent

³⁰⁶Daybell, 'Women's Letters and Letter-Writing', p. 104. See also Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500-1700* (Basingstoke and London, 1994), p. 253: 'it would, by the mid-seventeenth century, be uncommon to find a woman of the elite who could not handle her own correspondence.'

³⁰⁷Honor Lisle did not write her own letters, and the uncertainty of her signature suggests that she would not have been capable of penning a whole letter in her own hand. One of her daughters, Anne Basset, was also unable to do more than sign her own name. She writes 'And whereas ye do write to me that I do not write with my own hand, the truth is, that I cannot write nothing myself but mine own name.' Byrne, ed., *Lisle Letters*, No. 300, p. 334. Honor's other daughters, however, do appear to have benefitted from a newer course of instruction. They write fluently in good clear hands. See plates 8 and 13.

³⁰⁸*NBL*:I, p. 24.

³⁰⁹*NBL*:III, xv. 'In 1591 [Nathaniel Bacon] despatched his two older daughters Anne and Elizabeth - respectively aged eighteen and sixteen- to board at an academy which was run by Robert Sayer, the rector of Dickleborough ...' See also the letter of Anne, *Ibid.*, pp. 279-80.

³¹⁰Linda Pollock, *With Faith and Physic: The Life of a Tudor Gentlewoman* (London, 1993), p. 9. D.H. Clifford, ed., *The Diaries of Lady Anne Clifford* (Stroud, 1990), p. 2 'From the age of eleven, Anne had as a tutor the poet

letters to their husbands written in secretaries' hands.³¹¹ The letters of their daughters-in-law are almost all autograph.³¹² Indeed, far from being an impossibility, by the end of the sixteenth century autograph composition by women appears almost to have become a kind of family duty, the neglect of which was an offence of some gravity. In 1588, for example, Lucy St John wrote a letter to her father Lord Burghley:

Righte honorable and my very good Lorde my duty moste humbly remembred beinge loathe to aquainte your Lordshippe with this my bade writynge but rather then I wolde be condemnde to be vnmyndefull of my duty I rather chuse to be thought unskillful ...³¹³

By the later sixteenth century women's epistolary efforts continued to be placed in a different category to those of men. Many women wrote less fluently than men, a fact of which both they and their male correspondents were often highly conscious.³¹⁴ Women who wrote letters in this period were also aware that they did so in a culture critical of female speech. Though an exponent of female learning, Thomas More wrote with a touch of mockery to his daughters:

if there is nothing to write about, you should write as largely as you can about that nothing; nothing is easier than this for you, being women, and therefore prattlers by nature.³¹⁵

and writer Samuel Daniel.'

³¹¹Grace's letters are at Lambeth Palace Library, MS Talbot 3203, f. 223 and MS Talbot 3205, f. 1. For Christian's letters see n. 304 above.

³¹²The Countess of Shrewsbury ends a letter to the Earl 'Bare swete harte with my blotynge, of late I have yused to wryte letyll with my owne hande but [I] coulde not now for bayre'. Lambeth Palace Library, MS Talbot 3205, f. 73. See also autographs at ff. 64, 66 and 68 in the same manuscript. The letters of Joan Thynne are almost all holograph. Wall, ed., *Two Elizabethan Women*, p. xxxii.

³¹³BL, MS Lansdowne 104, No. 69, f. 175v.

³¹⁴Lady Anne Bacon writes 'Good Madam I have noe menes to salewte you but this my ell wrytten lettar, that both my penn is naught, my eyncke worse, and my inwensyon worst of all.' Jane Key, ed., 'The Letters and Will of Lady Dorothy Bacon', in *Norfolk Record Society* 56 (1993), pp. 77-112 at p. 87. 'Madam, that your Ladyship were as apte a scoller to learn from me to write trew englishe, as yow ar to husband paper, yet, whatsoever character be, cumming from your hand, they ar more wellcum then another mans exacte orthography' in P. R. Seddon, ed., *The Letters of John Holles, 1587-1637*, 3 vols., Thoroton Society 31, 35-36 (1975-86):II, p. 345.

³¹⁵... si quum nihil est quod scribatur, id ipsum scribatis effusissime, quo nihil est facilius vobis, praesertim faeminis, nempe natura loquaculis, et quibus assidue.' Rogers, ed., *Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, p. 256.

At the beginning of the following century, Maria Thynne joked to her husband:

I know thou wilt say (receiving two letters in a day from me) that I have tried the virtue of the aspen leaves under my tongue, which makes me prattle so much, for consider that all is business, for of my own natural disposition I assure thee that there is not a more silent woman living than myself.³¹⁶

There is, nevertheless, a clear difference between the attitudes towards female-authored letters found in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the earlier period the fear that women might exploit autograph letters to deceive their menfolk, or to usurp masculine authority, seems to have been sufficiently strong to deter women from writing their own missives. In the sixteenth century literacy continued to be viewed as a potential route to ruin for women. Yet by this period such concerns were counterbalanced or even outweighed by other considerations. One was a growing sense that privacy was desirable, and that intermediaries, such as secretaries, should be excluded from epistolary transactions. The other, perhaps more important still, was the sense that without the ability to read and write, a woman could no longer fulfil her roles as 'a great good huswyf'. The consequence was a transformation in women's relationship to letter-writing.

Conclusion

The period 1400 to 1600 saw significant changes in every almost every area of letter-writing practice. The causes of change vary according to the area of epistolary practice. In relation to composition, for example, the main impetus for change was perhaps the displacement of Anglo-Norman French as the main medium of written communication: once letters came to be written in a language familiar to the whole population, letter-writing became open not just to clerks and secretaries, but to male writers of all ranks. The gradual transformation of transmission and reception practices seems to have been produced by a variety of factors. One is the increase in the emphasis on the autograph, a classical idea revived by the humanists which appears to have gained popular currency in the sixteenth century. A second might be shifts in ideas of privacy. In the fifteenth century aristocrats were already able to write letters themselves, but often chose not to do so. By the sixteenth century there is a growing sense that epistolary transactions should be conducted without the involvement of

³¹⁶Wall, ed., *Two Elizabethan Women*, No. 63, p. 48.

servants where possible, and this idea may extend to the carriage and reading of letters as well as their composition. A third might be the introduction of humanist innovations - new forms of punctuation and the italic hand - which are thought to have facilitated silent reading. In all aspects of letter-writing, however, the main reason for change was probably rather broader and more pragmatic than this list suggests. It seems unlikely that the transition to English would have had such a dramatic impact if a significant number of men had not already felt the desire to control their own correspondence. If sixteenth-century men and women had not already begun to view reading and writing as skills essential to the conduct of everyday life, it is doubtful whether humanist educational reforms would have been adopted with such alacrity. The major determinant of change was not, therefore, the obvious philosophical movements - the rise of humanism, or the change in attitudes to women associated with the Reformation - but rather the spreading influence of the 'literate mentality' from a comparatively narrow elite to much broader section of society.

Appendix: Salutations

When viewed as a series the salutations of vernacular letters present a surprisingly clear pattern. In the period up to 1450, and particularly to 1430, the most common group of salutations is one not noted at all in Malcom Richardson's overview: formulae organised around the adjective 'dear'. In the 1420s, for example, the Earl of Warwick, wrote to the city of Coventry not as 'Trusty' but 'Dere and wel-belouyd, we grett you well ofte-sithis'.³¹⁷ The earliest surviving letter in English, sent by Sir John Hawkwood to Thomas Cogesale in 1392-3 opens:

Dere S. I grete you wel and do you to wytyn þt at the makyng of þis lettre I was in good poynt I thank God.³¹⁸

Elizabeth Despenser, Lady Zouche, opens a letter of 1403 to her agent in London John Bore 'Dere frend', and similar formulae are also used between family members in this period.³¹⁹ In 1399 Dame Joan Pelham wrote to her husband Sir John 'My dear lord' while in 1440 Agnes Paston saluted Judge William 'Dere housbond'.³²⁰ Around 1430 Margaret Walkerne wrote to her step-father Robert Armbrugh 'My dere and welbeloued fadre', while in the same period Robert addressed his brother 'My dere and welbeloued brother'.³²¹

The use of 'dear' appears to die out as a common epithet in salutations by around 1450. However, before this occurs new modes of expression begin to appear. Robert Armbrugh uses the formula 'Dere and welebelouyd frende' to a knightly acquaintance as late as 1451, but from the late 1420s onwards we see a growing tendency for status epithets to be used to addressees of status equivalent to or higher than that of the author. Around 1430, for

³¹⁷Mary Dormer Harris, ed., *Coventry Leet Book*, EETS o.s. 134 (1907), p. 75. The letter is dated 1424.

³¹⁸Kingsford, *Prejudice and Promise*, p. 23.

³¹⁹Paddy Payne and Caroline Barron, 'The Letters and Life of Elizabeth Depenser, Lady Zouche (d. 1408)', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* (1997): 126-56 at p. 151. See also E. Rickert, 'Some English Personal Letters of 1402', *Review of English Studies* (1932): 257-63.

³²⁰Laetitia Lyell, ed., *A Medieval Postbag* (London, 1934), p. 267; *PL:I*, No. 13, p. 26.

³²¹Carpenter, ed., *Armbrugh Papers*, pp. 126-27. For Robert's letters to William, see also pp. 102, 128.

example, William Paston opens a letter to the vicar of the abbot of Cluny 'My ryghte worthy and worshopful lord'; by the 1440s he himself is addressed as 'worthy and worshipfull' by his household servants. Family relationships show the same pattern.³²² Where Agnes Paston writes 'Dere housbond' to Judge William, her daughter-in-law addresses John Paston I as 'Ryth worchipful hosbon' from her first letter of 1440 right through to the last, of 1465. Robert Armbrugh refers to his brother as 'dere and welbeloued' as late as 1430, but two later letters, from William to Robert open 'Reverent and wel belouyd' and 'Right reverent and worschipfull brother'.³²³ In a body of letters which extends in date from 1447 to 1466, the mode of salutation most frequently used by William II, Clement and Edmund Paston to their older sibling John Paston I is 'Ryth worschipfull brothir'.

As Richardson's observation suggests, 'Dere and welbeloued' does not entirely disappear from the epistolary repertoire in the middle of the century. This particular collocation does, however, appear to alter in function. First, surviving letters from the royal context, written from the 1450s, suggest that 'dear' had become an epithet to be applied only to female addressees.³²⁴ After c.1440 'dear' does not seem to be used in any other kind of salutation. Second, both the formula, 'Dere and welbeloued' and its new masculine corollary, 'Trusty and welbeloued' are used in a more specialised way from mid-century onwards. As Richardson has stated, one area in which this form of salutation is used is in letters from the king; Henry V uses this formula when writing to the mayor and aldermen of London in 1417, and the form is rapidly adopted as the standard manner of opening royal letters.³²⁵ By the 1440s variants of this form, such as 'Trusti and right welbelovid', 'Right trusty and entirely welbeloued' appear to have been adopted as standard by nobles writing to members of the lower aristocracy. For example, this is the mode of address used by Alice, Lady Sudeley to Thomas Stonor around 1431 and to Nicholas Wendover around 1462.³²⁶ It is

³²²J. Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters*, 4 vols. (Westminster, 1872-75):I, pp. 50-51.

³²³Carpenter, *Armbrugh Papers*, pp. 186-87. Both letters are dated c. 1443.

³²⁴Monro, ed., *Letters of Queen Margaret*, pp. 67, 97, 103, 114, 118.

³²⁵R. W. Chambers and Marjorie Daunt, eds., *A Book of London English* (Oxford, 1931), pp. 64-87.

³²⁶*SL*, No. 53, p. 135; *PRO*, SC1/51/50.

also the salutation addressed by Duke of Norfolk to John Paston I around 1444, and by Lord Scales to the same addressee in 1450.³²⁷ By mid-century the unqualified epithet 'welbeloved' appears, in the aristocratic context, to be applied exclusively to those whose status, either absolutely, or in relative terms, required no particular recognition by the writer. This is indicated by the fact that in these letters, as in those sent by the king to his subjects, 'welbeloued' is invariably followed by the perfunctory 'I greet you well' rather than by the respectful formula 'I commend me (humbly) unto you'. In the mercantile context, however, different rules seem to have applied. Perhaps because they did not form a natural part of the 'community of worship', merchants often omit status epithets such as 'worshipful' or 'worthy' when writing to their peers. In this social context elements of vocabulary which are understood as condescending in the aristocratic milieu, such as 'trusty' and 'welbeloued' are paired with respectful, or even deferential commendations. For example, a merchant writing in the reign of Henry VI opens a letter to an individual of similar station 'Rythe tryste frend, y comand me unto 3oue hartylle'.³²⁸ Thomas Makyn, 'man of business' to chancery clerk William Marchall, salutes his master 'Well by louyd and trusty frende I recomende me to yow'.³²⁹ Similar formulae are found in the letters of the mercer John Marchall to his kinsmen, in those of the Cely family and in many other letters preserved of writers of similar status, preserved in the volumes of Ancient Correspondence in the Public Record Office.³³⁰

By mid century a degree of organisation seems to be apparent in epistolary practices. The third quarter of the fifteenth century to around the middle of the sixteenth, seems to constitute a third, distinct phase in the evolution of epistolary formulae. In the letters of the later fifteenth century a growing standardisation, or drive towards coherence is seen. The epithet 'worthy', which, as we have seen, occurs with considerable frequency in the salutations of the 1440s and 1450s, disappears entirely from the epistolary vocabulary, though it remains a fixed element of petitionary discourse. This change seems to be tied to

³²⁷Gairdner, ed., *Paston Letters*:1, pp.56, 117-19.

³²⁸PRO, SC1/51/91.

³²⁹Lyell, *Medieval Postbag*, p. 287.

³³⁰CL, Nos. 4, 8, 95, 133, 169, 174-75 *inter alia*; Lyell, ed., *Medieval Postbag*, pp. 298, 300; POR, SC1/51/30, SC1/51/52, SC1/51/91.

the main development of the period, a broad move towards the specialisation of vocabulary in relation to status. From the 1420s to around 1470, with the exception of the clearly marked adjective 'noble', the epithets used to indicate respect or social deference appear not to have been clearly differentiated in reference. Thus where gentlemen are usually saluted as 'reverent' or 'worshipful' they may also be described by other terms. In 1465, for example, J. Payn saluted John Paston I 'Ryght honourabyll and my ryght enterly bylovvyd maister' while ten years earlier Richard Bingham writes to Sir John Fastolf 'Right honorable and reverend maistre'.³³¹ The equivalence or interchangeability of the terms 'reverent', 'worshipful' and 'honourable' is also apparent in the letters sent to members of the nobility in this period. Some time before 1450 William Tailboys wrote to Viscount Beaumont 'Right honorabull and my right wurshipfull Lord, I recomaund me to your gode Lordship with all my service'.³³² In 1454 the Earls of March and Rutland open a letter to their father with the elaborate phrase 'Ryght hiegh and myghty prince our most *worshipfull* and gretely redoubted Lorde and Fadre'.³³³ In 1442 a member of the Staple addressed a letter to Thomas, lord Cromwell 'Unto the right worshipful and full singuler gode lord the Tresorer of England', while a letter from Lady Berkeley to her husband, written some time before 1463, bears the endorsement 'To my right worshipful and reverent Lord and Husband be these delivered'.³³⁴

By the early sixteenth century both these terms appear to have acquired more specific reference. In the Plumpton collection around 230 letters survive from the period 1470 to 1551. With the exception of the letters of the nobility, which follow the pattern 'Right trusty and welbeloved', outlined above, the great majority of these letters use the epithets 'worshipful' or 'reverent' to refer to their gentle recipients. In only four cases is the adjective 'honourable' applied to an addressee:³³⁵ at least two of these can be dismissed as

³³¹Gairdner, ed., *Paston Letters*:1, pp. 131, 356.

³³²*Ibid.*, p. 96.

³³³BL, MS Cotton Vespasian F. XIII, f. 90.

³³⁴PRO, SC1/51/54; Monro, ed., *Letters of Margaret of Anjou*, p. 65.

³³⁵Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, Nos. 96, 131, 138 and 192.

aberrations.³³⁶ The same pattern emerges in other gentry collections of similar date. In both the late Stonor letters and the fragmentary Trevelyan correspondence 'worshipful' is the dominant epithet applied to addressees of gentle status.³³⁷ By the time we reach the Willoughby letters, the only gentry correspondence of any size to survive from the middle of the sixteenth century, forms of address seem to have undergone still further refinement. In this collection, which spans the period 1525 to c. 1549, not one salutation or address to an individual of gentle status contains either of the terms 'honorable' or 'reverent'. The great majority of correspondents writing to individuals of knightly rank select the specific formula 'Right worshipful sir'.³³⁸

An examination of letters addressed to the nobility in the same period shows an equally clear pattern. No published collections of letters exist to represent the nobility at the close of the fifteenth century. However, a group of letters sent to and from the Earl of Ormonde spanning the years c.1480 to 1515 has survived in the Public Records.³³⁹ In these a clear trend is evident. In 1497/8 the Earl wrote a series of letters to the Earl of Kildare. The first of these opens 'Right worshipful Lord and cousin', the remaining three read 'Right honorable lord and cousin'.³⁴⁰ In none of the letters which Ormonde received in this period do the epithets 'reverent' or 'worshipful' occur. Where qualified, the title 'lord' is always accompanied by the adjectives 'honourable', 'good' or 'noble'. As with the gentry, so too in the letters of the nobility, the trend observable at the close of the fifteenth century seems

³³⁶ W. C. Calverley Trevelyan, and C.E. Trevelyan, eds. *Trevelyan Papers: Part Three (1477-1776)*, Camden 1st series 105 (1872). In the letter of Germain Pole the adjective 'honorable' has been interlined, and so perhaps represents an afterthought; it is omitted both from the address of this letter and from other missives sent by the same author. Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 131, p. 128. One of the other examples occurs in a letter which seems to have been written by an author unfamiliar with the general conventions of letter-writing, or perhaps indeed, with those of English prose more generally. The peculiar opening of this letter, from a 'tenant' of Sir Robert Plumpton reads 'Most & honorable and worshipfull master, of whom myne intellygence & service lyes vnto, with all due recomendations in þe most humilitywyse þat I can thinke, or may' Ibid., No. 96, pp. 100-01 at p. 100.

³³⁷ Sir William is only addressed as honourable after his elevation to knight of the Bath. This example therefore confirms the growing precision with which the term is being used.

³³⁸ Mary A. Welch, ed., 'Willoughby Letters of the first half of the Sixteenth Century', in *Thoroton Society Record Series* 24 (1967) pp. 1-98

³³⁹ PRO, SC1, volumes 51 and 52.

³⁴⁰ PRO, SC1/51, Nos. 140i, 141ii, 142I and 143i.

to be consolidated in the sixteenth. In a collection of letters preserved in British Library Additional Manuscript 48965, we find nine letters sent to lord Clifford between 1510 and 1523 and twenty-two to his son, the first Earl of Cumberland, between 1525 and 1542.³⁴¹ In all these letters the epithet 'worshipful' only occurs twice, both times in the address of endorsement, rather than in the body of the letters. In all other cases in which epithets are used, these are 'right honourable' and 'good', the single most common form being 'Right honorable and my singular good Lord.'

³⁴¹A. G. Dickens, ed., *Clifford Letters of the Sixteenth Century*, Surtees Society 172 (1957).

PART II
CORRESPONDENCE IN THE CIVIC ARENA

In the introduction to the thesis we noted the comparative lack of interest shown by political historians in 'literary' material, such as letters. The following case study represents an attempt to show that, when read closely, ordinary epistolary documents can cast important new light on aspects of political culture in past times. The approach adopted in these two chapters could be applied to many bodies of material; the 'gentry correspondence' of the fifteenth century would repay closer scrutiny, as would the language and rhetorical tropes of petitions submitted in Chancery and to the King in parliament.¹ In this study I have chosen to focus on the civic arena for two reasons. The first is pragmatic; the civic records of Bristol, Coventry and York not only survive in a coherent series for this period, but are available in complete editions.² The second reason for focussing on the city as a locus of political culture is historiographic. As a comparatively new discipline, urban history has adopted a view of 'politics' which is both more complex and more rewarding for the cultural historian than that associated with historians working in a more traditional political mould. First, scholars of the civic arena have understood symbolism as a key aspect of the construction and negotiation of political identities; while ceremony and ritual have formed the main focus of attention to date, recent studies have also begun to consider the importance of civic writing as a form of symbolic self representation.³ Second, historians studying the medieval borough have anticipated their 'high political' colleagues in recognising the importance of ideology in the organisation of governance; in particular, they have been willing to concede the value of 'charters, law suits and customals' as sources of

¹A model of what might be done with the gentry correspondence is provided by Philippa Maddern, 'Honour among the Pastons: gender and integrity in fifteenth-century English provincial society', *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1988): 357-371.

²As we shall see below, recent work on the linguistic norms of civic writing offers a further practical advantage. See Susan Hughes, 'Guildhall and Chancery English 1377-1422', *Guildhall Studies in London History* 4 (1980): 53-62.

³This trend was initiated by Charles Phythian-Adams in his pioneering essay 'Ceremony and the citizen: the ceremonial year at Coventry 1450-1550', in P. Clark and P. Slack, eds., *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500-1700* (London, 1972), pp. 57-85. Recent studies highlighting the symbolic dimension of civic documents are Brigitte Bedos Rezak, 'Civic liturgies and urban records in northern France 1100-1400' in Barbara A. Hanawalt and Kathryn L. Reyerson, eds., *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe* (Minneapolis, 1994), pp. 34-55 and Deborah O'Brien "'The veray registre of all trouthe": the content, function and character of civic registers of London and York, c. 1274-c.1482', Unpublished DPhil Thesis, University of York 1999.

lay political ideas.⁴ The following case study seeks to locate itself at the intersection of these two approaches. By examining the rhetorical tropes and linguistic nuances of 'ordinary' letters and petitions, I hope to offer a new perspective on the construction and negotiation of civic identities in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

⁴Susan Reynolds, 'Medieval urban history and the history of political thought', *Urban History Yearbook* (1982): 14-27 at p. 15.

CHAPTER TWO: INTRA-CITY NEGOTIATIONS

The first part of this case study will focus on the construction of identities and the negotiation of power *within* the late medieval city. In this first section, evidence will be drawn from the civic registers of four towns; London, Coventry, Bristol and York. Apart from the accessibility of their records, the rationale for selecting the last three towns is their comparable size and standing; by the end of our period all had attained the city status, and all had won separate jurisdiction from the county.⁵ We shall be using correspondence exchanged by city officers in different towns as a subsidiary source in this chapter. The type of text which forms the main focus of analysis here will, however, be the *petitions* submitted by freemen to the officers who governed them. This approach has been adopted for two reasons. First, as we saw in chapter one, the generic distinction between letters and petitions was blurred in our period:⁶ both types of writing were governed by the *ars dictaminis*; many features of structure and vocabulary are shared; in our period the two genres were even described by the same word 'bill'.⁷ Second, like letters, civic petitions have, for the most part, been read simply as sources of 'factual' information; attention has been focussed on the sort of requests which petitioners have made of the civic authorities, and on how such demands might reflect secular changes, such as the marginalisation of women workers. As with letters, little interest has hitherto been shown in the particular ways in which such requests were formulated, in the rhetorical tropes which were employed, and in the way in which formulae changed over time.⁸ In this chapter petitions will be treated as a source

⁵Bristol was elevated to county status in 1373, York in 1396 and Coventry in 1451. Bristol was created a city in 1542. The major sources for the following discussion are E. W. W. Veale, ed., *The Great Red Book of Bristol*, 5 vols., Bristol Record Society 2, 4, 8, 16, 18 (Bristol, 1931-53); F. B. Bickley, ed., *The Little Red Book of Bristol*, 2 vols. (Bristol, 1901); Mary Dormer Harris, ed., *The Coventry Leet Book or Mayor's Register*, 4 vols. EETS o.s. 134-35, 138, 146 (1907-13); Maud Sellars, ed., *York Memorandum Book*, 2 vols. Surtees Society 120, 125 (1912-15); Joyce W. Percy, ed., *York Memorandum Book, Part 3*, Surtees Society 186 (1973); Lorraine C. Attreed, ed., *The York House Books 1461-1490*, 2 vols. (Stroud, 1991). Material quoted from York materials has been checked against the originals. Unless otherwise stated, all references from the London Letter-Books are taken from my own transcriptions of the originals, which are held at the Corporation of London Record Office.

⁶In an unpublished lecture entitled 'English Domestic Letter-Writers of the Middle Ages' Eileen Power states that 'petitions ... are letters too'. I should like to thank Dr Maxine Berg for giving me access to this material.

⁷This similarity of purpose is probably responsible for the striking convergence of some aspects of the vocabulary of letters and petitions - the convention of describing the writer as 'bedeman/woman'(later orator), being the most obvious.

⁸Reginald Sharpe's edition of *London Letter-Books* is a good example of such attitudes. For where the

comparable (if not directly equivalent) to letters, which can offer us insights into an arena for which no letters exist.

Understanding Petitions

Before we can begin to consider what petitions might show about the political culture of late medieval cities one point requires careful consideration. What type of evidence do petitions contain? Do the modes of expression in these documents reflect the views of the petitioners, or are they merely a flattering echo of the attitudes of the addressee? A superficial examination of the evidence suggests that the first view cannot be maintained with any conviction. As scholars working with similar material have noted, the petitionary position is an inherently constraining one.⁹ In order to maximise the chance of obtaining a positive response to a request, the writer is obliged to present him/herself in a light which the addressee will find comprehensible and sympathetic. Similarly, the addressee is likely to be described in terms which are considered by the writer either to be extremely flattering, or as 'correct' as possible, where an established system is in operation. This point is perhaps best illustrated by the comparison of petitions to dissenting materials which have survived in civic registers. In the *Coventry Leet Book*, the following example of a subversive 'bill' is given:

Ye þat be of myght,
Se that ye do right,
Thynk on youre othe.¹⁰

In the course of the same dispute, a citizen is quoted as inciting the people of the city with the words "Sirs, here me! We shall neuer haue oure ryght till we haue striken of the hedes of iii or iiij of thes Churles hedes that rulen vs...".¹¹ Clearly the views of the civic authorities found in petitions are not the only ones which were circulating in the cities in our survey; the citizenry had their own concepts of the status, rights and duties of their superiors. Petitions may not represent civic governors in precisely the terms that the authorities

ordinances submitted by guilds to the civic authorities are frequently given in full, the petitions, which generally accompanied them, are usually omitted. See also Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Ann Arbor, 1948); A. S. Green, *Town Life in the Fifteenth Century*, 2 vols. (London, 1894).

⁹See, for example, Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives* (Stanford, 1987), pp.3-4.

¹⁰Dormer Harris, ed., *Coventry Leet Book*, II, p. 577. [Hereafter *CLB*].

¹¹*CLB*:II, p. 556. See also slanderous words against the mayor of York in Attreed, ed., *York House Books*:I, pp. 123, 279 *inter alia*. [Hereafter *HB*].

themselves would have used. However, at the very least, they represent a view of civic authority which petitioners considered to be flattering.

How far, however, might the case be pushed towards the opposite conclusion, that these petitions are more or less the direct product of the civic authorities themselves? At first sight there seems to be good evidence to support such a contention, at least in certain towns. For example, so great is the standardisation of both terms of address and rhetoric in some volumes of the London Letter-Books, that it is tempting to conclude that they were either originally written by town clerks, or rewritten upon being entered into the registers. In Bristol similar conclusions might be drawn. For example, the ordinances of the Barbers and of the Dyers, both submitted in 1439, are virtually identical in their use of petitionary formulae.¹² Even more significantly, they, and other petitions of this period, include the following closing clause:

Reseruing to yow and to your successoures plein poair atte all tymes to repelle, vndo, make lesse and encrease the same ordenauns to youre pleser as wel for the profite, worschip and wele of the seid Commune as of the seide Crafte ...¹³

This clause is highly derivative of town language, specifically of part of the formula regularly used by the town government in the ratification of the ordinances submitted by guilds:

Reseruata eisdem Majori, Vicecomiti, Balliuis, et probis hominibus Communis Consilii ejusdem ville et successoribus suis qui pro tempore fuerint plenaria auctoritate et potestate predictas ordinaciones aut aliquam vel aliquas earundem ordinacionum reuocare, adnichilare, augmentare, de nouo facere aut diminuere quocienscumque et quamdocumque prefatis Majori, Vicecomiti, Balliuis et probis hominibus et eorum successoribus expedire videbitur pro communi vtilitate, honore et meliori gubernacione communitatis ville et artis predicte.¹⁴

Given that petitions appear to have been read at council meetings, we might understand registration as the final act in a ritualised reassertion of hierarchy, authorised and controlled at every stage by the civic authorities themselves.

Closer examination of the petitions suggests that such a view is probably too extreme,

¹²Bickley, ed., *Little Red Book of Bristol*, II, pp. 152-53 and 170-71. Hereafter *LRB*.

¹³*LRB:II*, p. 152.

¹⁴*LRB:II*, p. 158: 'full authority and power being reserved to the Mayor, Sheriff, Bailiffs and good men of the Common Council of the same town, and their successors for the time being, to revoke, annul, augment, renew or diminish the aforesaid ordinances or any of them, as often as and whensoever it shall seem expedient to the aforesaid Mayor, Sheriff, Bailiffs and good men and their successors for the common utility, honour and better government of the Commonalty of the town and the craft aforesaid.'

however. First, the manner of the registration of petitions in both Bristol and London, where standardisation is most prevalent, lays particular emphasis on the reproduction of petitions in the words in which they are submitted. The final clause of the general introductory formula in both cities reads 'optulerant unam billam, tenor cujus sequitur in hec verba...'¹⁵ Such a preface could, of course, be purely rhetorical; as we saw in chapter one, language used in formal contexts sometimes reflects tradition or ideology rather than practice. Detailed examination of the petitions does, however, seem to confirm the claim of civic authorities that they were respectful of the language of petitioners. The first clue to this lies in the dialect in which the petitions are written. In Bristol the petition of the Farriers, Smiths, Cutlers and Lockmakers ('Lockyers') contains a number of markedly southern dialectal forms, for example the verbal 'y' prefix, the adverbial ending '-lich', and the pronominal forms 'hem' and 'here'.¹⁶ As these features are not found in the ordinances registered on immediately preceding or succeeding folios, the natural explanation for their presence here is that the scribe has retained the language of an early original copy. A similar phenomenon can be identified in York. Here a general drift towards standardisation can be seen in the ordinances submitted by guilds, as in the writing of the civic registers more generally. However, petitions do differ from one another, and some do show identifiably different linguistic traits to entries written directly under the control of the town clerks. For example, the terms 'whilke/ilke' appear in two ordinances of 1475, another of 1479 has 'mykell' for much/many.¹⁷ Though terms such as these had been freely used by town clerks in the first half of the century, the only examples found in the House Books after 1475 are associated with language sources outside the city.¹⁸ As in Bristol, the appearance of these 'disfavoured' forms seems to suggest the respect of town clerks for the precise wording of original documents.

The point is reinforced by a consideration of the formulae used by petitioners. Though, as we have discussed, some groups of petitions do show marked signs of 'standardisation', in all four cities some variation can be seen in salutations. At York this is particularly

¹⁵LB I, f. 6

¹⁶LRB:II, pp. 181-84.

¹⁷Percy, ed., *York Memorandum Book, Part 3*, pp. 179-81 and 183; Sellars, ed., *York Memorandum Book: I*, pp. 170-72. [Hereafter *YMB*].

¹⁸The word 'mekill' is found in *HB:II*, p. 542. The word occurs in an account of testimony given orally, and is not therefore an example of civic language.

pronounced in the small number of English petitions. For example, where the petition of the Marshalls is addressed to 'our' lord and masters, that of the Vintners is directed to 'thair... lord the Mair'. The Spicers use a third formula, petitioning 'your ryght hygh worthynesse Mair and Aldermen'.¹⁹ Though they are generally more standardised, petitions at Bristol and London also contain some 'maverick' formulae.²⁰ Irregular styles can also be found in the rhetoric of petitions. For example a 1435 petition of Coventry includes snatches of dialogue, presumably for dramatic effect.²¹ This textual device finds no parallels either within the records of Coventry or any of the other towns included in this survey. A different, but equally unusual example is found in a petition of the London Commonalty:

Wherethrough þe said Co'es be foule and sore hindred in here goodes and be nowe of so litell power that þei mowe nat lene monnoie to þe King as here will is and þei hadde good *Wherfor as it is saide In Englissh proverbes better to amende late þan never like to you .. bi your wise discrecions to considre ...*²²

There seems no clear reason why some petitions should be altered to conform to a model, while others were copied in their original form. Like the presence of dialectal forms, the diversity of prose style therefore tends to suggest a system tolerant, even respectful, of the specific ways in which groups within the city chose to present themselves to the authorities. In sum, these petitions cannot be seen either as a simple reflection of the attitudes of the townspeople, or those of the civic authorities. Petitionary form was not entirely constrained, but neither was it entirely controlled, in a coercive fashion. Rather, what we see in petitions is a form of highly constrained dialogue between the two groups. As we shall see later, even within this comparatively constrained genre significant patterns of diversity can be traced, and patterns which might be characterised as 'resistance' identified.

Tracing Change: Civic Petitions c.1330-1500

Civic petitions do not survive in great numbers before 1400. However, a complete series of enrolments has been preserved in the Letter-Books of the city of London from the early

¹⁹Marshalls at *HB:I*, p. 410. Vintners and Spicers at *YMB:III*, pp. 157 and 158.

²⁰For example, the petition of the Tanners of Bristol is the only one to address the civic authorities as 'treshonores et tressages sirs'. The Coopers' salutation 'A les treshonurables tresgraciouses et tressages seigneurs mair et Aldermans' stands out as exceptional among Anglo-Norman petitions registered at London. *LRB:II*, p. 111 (f.127); London, Corporation of London Record Office, Letter Book [hereafter LB] I, f. lxxxiiib (1409).

²¹*CLB:I*, pp. 181-2.

²²Reginald R. Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Letter-Books: Letter-Book K* (London, 1912), p. 162. (LB K, f. 125.)

fourteenth century; this evidence can be supplemented by the small number of early petitions at Coventry, York and Bristol, and by entries surviving from this period which note the receipt of petitions but which do not preserve the original text in full. These texts have never before been examined in detail. The specific form in which petitions were written, as opposed to the demands which they contain, has not hitherto been regarded as a matter of historical interest. Yet, when examined closely, as a chronological series, these texts reveal clear patterns which seem to have direct relevance to the political culture of cities. The first period, which extends from the earliest petitions to the beginning of the fifteenth century, is characterised by two features. First, the texts produced in this period are written in surprisingly simple language. Second, within this limited linguistic system, guild and civic governance are characterised in very similar terms. This can be seen in two distinct areas: the description of the parties to the petitionary transaction, and the values on which the granting of petitions is grounded.

In the later fourteenth century, the commonest way for petitioners to describe themselves in the opening sentence or salutation of their bills is as 'good men'. For example, between 1344 and 1356 'prient les bones gentz', the formula most frequently used at London, appears in the petitions of the Girdlers, Pewterers, Shearmen and Farriers.²³ Where petitioners do not describe themselves as 'bones', they usually adopt the still simpler method of presenting themselves without any qualification, for example as 'les Ortoners' or 'Sir John persone de la Eglise de Wyllinghale'.²⁴ This is the approach adopted, for example, by the Gardeners, Weavers and Plumbers of London, and also by the commons of York in the second half of the fourteenth century.²⁵ In the same petitions city governors are presented with comparable simplicity. Before 1360 the usual mode of address to the mayor and officers of London is simply 'As meire & Aldermens de la Citee de Loundres', or occasionally the more specific 'A Henry Pycard, meyre & Audermans de la Citee de Loundres'.²⁶ Where they are not alluded to by name or by office, city governors seem to be described, like the petitioners, as 'good men'. A London petition of 1350 is addressed 'As

²³LB F, ff. lxxxviii, clv, clxxvi; LB G, f. cxxx.

²⁴LB F, ff. cxi and lxxxiiib.

²⁵LB F, ff. cxi, clxxiii; LB G, f. cxlix; *YMB*:I, p. 50.

²⁶LB G, f. cxxx. (Farriers' petition, 1356).

bones gentes & honourables meir & Audermans de la Citee de Loundres'.²⁷ In a York petition of the early fifteenth century, reference is made to 'les bones gentz aldermans de la dite citee'.²⁸ Ratifying clauses from York and Bristol refer to the consent of 'maiori et probis hominibus' and 'maire et bones gentz'.²⁹ The earliest surviving petition at Coventry combines the two techniques, opening 'As Maire, Bayllyfs, Chamburlens, & autres bonez gentez del enquest'.³⁰

In the same period, the identity between guilds and cities is also suggested by the rhetoric of petitions. A commonly stated reason for granting petitioners' requests at this time is for the 'common profit' or 'honesty' of the supplicants. At York, for example, three early petitions require the acceptance of ordinances 'pur le commune profett et honeste de lour artifice'.³¹ At Bristol the entry introducing the petition of the Dyers of 1407 states that the new ordinances have been accepted 'pur proffit et amendement de dite art'.³² Two citizens petitioning the leet at Coventry in 1421 ask that financial reward may be granted them by the city 'in supportyng of hur honestye'. In the same period both concepts, of 'honesty' and of 'common profit', are also regularly invoked in relation to the city. For example, at London regulations were passed in 1414 'pur honestate de la cite de Loundres'.³³ In 1421 the wardens of the crafts of Coventry were urged to present their ordinances to the mayor, recorder and bailiff, so that 'the poyntes that byn lawfull, good and honest for the Cite be alowyd hem'.³⁴ At Bristol ordinances passed in the late fourteenth century begin 'Pur le proffit de toute la Cominalte de la ville de Bristuyt et assentuz'.³⁵ At York and Bristol the identity of values is particularly highlighted in the closing clauses of petitions. Thus for example, the Lorimers of York ask that their ordinances be accepted 'pur comune profit si

²⁷LB F. f. clxxiii. (Shearmen's petition, 1349/50)

²⁸YMB:I, p. 55.

²⁹YMB:I, p. 59 and II, p. 121(1413 and 1384). LRB:II, pp. 26 and 44, dated 1346-7 and 1364. See also the introduction to the ordinances of 1346 passed by the mayor, recorder and 'autres bones gentz illeoques assemblez'. Ibid., p. 10.

³⁰CLB:I, p. 3.

³¹Petition of the Fletchers, possibly 1388, the undated petition of the Cutlers, and the Joiners' petition of c.1413. YMB:I, pp. 110, 134, 148.

³²LRB:II, p. 81.

³³LB F, f. ciii. See also LB I, f. cxliii. References in French to 'honeste' occur at LB H, ff. cclxxviii, cclii

³⁴CLB:I, p. 32, See also pp. 22, 33 and 37.

³⁵LRB:II, p. 72.

bien de tute la citee come de lour dit mister'. The Pelterers make the same request 'pur profit du dit artifice et pur comune profit du poeple'.³⁶ At Bristol the Fullers concede that their ordinances could be changed if any new point should arise 'queux purront estre profitablez sibien al ville come al auant dite mesteer'.³⁷

At Bristol and London a slightly different vocabulary is sometimes used. In these two cities actions are sometimes justified by appeal not to the 'honeste' or 'proffit' of the town/city, but to its 'honour'³⁸. In 1386, for example, the Aldermen of London are instructed to set watch to defend the 'honestete & sauve garde de la Citee' but are reminded 'ceste chose ne lessez come vous volez lonur & profit de la dite Citee'.³⁹ In the 1390s the commons petitioned their governors demanding that one Adam Carlisle be debarred from holding office in the city, for behaviour contrary to 'le honour & commune profit de la citee'.⁴⁰ However, the use of this term marks no distinction between town and craft; in this period the same language is also used in relation to petitioners. At Bristol the ratification clause found at the close of a number of early petitions states that the ordinances have been accepted 'sibien pur lonneur, profit et bien de la dite ville come de le mistier suisdit'.⁴¹ At London the Saddlers petitioned in 1362 for their ordinances to be accepted 'pur commune profit del Roialme & honur & salvacion de lour mestier'.⁴² Those of the Bowyers were found in 1408 to be 'tam pro honore artis predictis quam pro commune comodo dictis civitatis'.⁴³ In 1400 the Joiners complained that the lack of regulation was 'a graund damage

³⁶YMB:I, pp. 101 and 60. See also the introduction to the Tailors' petition 'Ceaux sont les ordinancez faitz al honour de Dieu et pur commune profit des gentz del art des taillours avaunt nomez et du poeple de la citee avaunt dite'. YMB:I, p. 96.

³⁷LRB:II, p. 80 (1406).

³⁸In fact, it seems that both Anglo-Norman 'honest', 'honesté' and 'honesteté' could also be translated as 'honour' and 'honourable' rather than English 'honest' and 'honesty'. Though the Latin 'honestate' does not appear in the *Revised Medieval Latin Word List*, it seems possible that the same is true also of this term. This does not undermine my point here, however, which is that the same values or qualities are applied to city and guild in this period. As we shall see below, this ceases to be the case in the later fifteenth century; the English word 'honest' and 'honesty', from their use within the registers, seem very clearly to refer to individuals of lesser dignity. W. Rothwell, L. W. Stone and T. B. W. Reid, eds., *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, 2 vols. (London, 1992):I, pp. 355-56.

³⁹LB H, f. cc.

⁴⁰LB H, f. clivb. References can also be found to the concern that the city might sustain 'damage ne deshonor'. See LB H ff. cxcixb, cclii.

⁴¹LRB:II, pp. 135 (1418) and 117 (1419)

⁴²LB F, f. cib. The same formula occurs at the end of the petition at f. cxvi.

⁴³LB I, f. lxviib.

disceite & vileinie des honorables gens del mistier auant ditez'.⁴⁴ The language used at Bristol and London differs slightly to that found at Coventry and York. However all four cities have one point in common: the interests and values of city and guild seem to be described in the same terms.

By the beginning of the fifteenth century significant changes begin to emerge in the organisation of petitionary discourse. The most striking of these developments is the alteration in the presentation of petitioner and addressee. Within the Anglo-Norman petitions two distinct changes can be traced in the way in which civic governors are characterised. First, in petitions submitted at London after 1350, the simple formula 'As meire & aldermans' begins to be replaced by salutations which qualify the addressees by status epithets. Subsidiary adjectives include 'sages' and 'droiturels', but the principle term applied to the mayor and aldermen from this time onwards is 'honorable'; up to around 1370 the two most common salutations are 'As *honorable*s meir & Aldermans' or 'As *honorable*s hommes, meir & aldermans'.⁴⁵ In two early entries in York's A/Y Memorandum Book similar forms of address can be seen. For example, a commons petition thought to date from the 1390s begins 'Al honorables hommes le meir et les aldermans de la Citee'.⁴⁶ An entry noting the acceptance of the petition of the Tilers in 1413 states that the ordinances were submitted to the judgement 'del honorable homme Nicolays Bakburn'.⁴⁷

Within a few years modes of address had shifted once again. The majority of London petitions written after 1375 refer to the mayor and aldermen not as 'honorable *hommes*' or 'meir', but by the more distinguished title '*seigneurs*'.⁴⁸ The great majority of the Anglo-Norman petitions preserved at York postdate 1375. They too are addressed to the 'honorable *seigneurs* et sages meir et aldermans'. At Bristol, though the members of the common council continue to be referred to in ratification clauses as 'bones gentz' or 'probes

⁴⁴LB I, f. viii.

⁴⁵The first formula is found at LB G, ff. cclxxxiv, cclxviii. The second is seen at LB F, f. clxxiii; LB G, ff. cxlix, clxix, ccxl, cclxxiii and cclxxxiii. 'Sages' occurs at LB E, f. cxlix; LB F, ff. cxlvib; LB G, ff. clxix, ccxliii. 'Droiturels' is seen at LB F, f. clxvii.

⁴⁶YMB:I, p. 50.

⁴⁷YMB I, p. 59. A similar trend might be traced in the way in which the common councillors of Bristol are described in the entries of petitions.

⁴⁸The first use of this term seems to be in the petition of the merchants of the Hanse, LB F, f. cxlviiib. This dates from 1346/7.

homines', most petitions are addressed in more elaborate fashion 'As honnurables *sirs* Mair, Viscont et Baillifs, et honorables *sirs* del Commune Counsell de la ville de Bristuyt'.⁴⁹

Over the same period a comparable reorganisation is evident in the characterisation of petitioners. As we have seen, early writers described themselves straightforwardly as 'les bones gentz' or 'les gentz del artifice de X'. They also present their case simply, perhaps even with assertiveness; they 'pray' ('*prient*') for redress, or 'show' ('*monstrent*') the cause of the grievance. From the end of the fourteenth century, however, suits are couched in rather different terms. Instead of describing themselves as 'good' or 'reputable', petitioners are now presented as 'simples', 'humbles' or 'povres'. Thus the weavers of Bristol present themselves as '*voz povers Comburgoises*', while the commons of York present themselves as '*voz simples veisyns*'.⁵⁰ Further, rather than simply asking for redress, petitioners now often present their case more cautiously. Thus in 1402 the Joiners of London '*suppliount treshumblement*' to their governors.⁵¹ Four years later the Fullers of Bristol '*suppliant humblement*'.⁵²

With the replacement of 'bones' by 'honourables' and the substitution of the honorific titles 'sirs' or 'seignours' for 'hommes' or 'gentz' a social gulf begins to open between petitioner and addressee. The fifteenth century sees the intensification of this trend. The transition into English appears to have had comparatively little impact on the description of petitioners. The terms of address used to civic governors, on the other hand, display clear patterns of change. At London, the first petition submitted in English uses the address formula 'Noble lords'.⁵³ Though this salutation lacks the honorific adjectives found in Anglo-Norman petitions, it retains the lack of differentiation between the mayor and his brethren which characterises these texts. The Hurers petition of 1437 follows the same pattern, referring to both mayor and aldermen as 'the gracious lordes'.⁵⁴ However, by the second half of the fifteenth century the two grades have come to be firmly distinguished. The distinction lies

⁴⁹ *LRB:II*, p. 144. No other Anglo-Norman petitions survive at Coventry.

⁵⁰ *LRB:II*, p. 118; *YMB:I*, p. 78.

⁵¹ *LB I*, f. viii.

⁵² *LRB:II*, p. 75.

⁵³ *LB K*, ff. 6b-7b.

⁵⁴ *LB K*, f. 172 (1437).

not just in title but in the epithets used to describe each rank.⁵⁵ A typical salutation from this period reads :

To the full honourable lord and right worshipfull soveragnes the maire and Aldermen of the Citee of London ...⁵⁶

With this development, the mayor has gained status not simply in relation to the petitioners, the ordinary guildsmen, but also in comparison to the other civic officers.

In York, comparatively few English petitions have survived in complete form for the fifteenth century. However both in these fragments, and in the larger body of material registered in response to, and sometimes incorporating petitions, a clear pattern can be observed. In the first full petition, dated 1428, the mode of address used is very similar to that found in Anglo-Norman bills. John Lyllyng writes 'Vnto his wirshipfull Mair and þe Aldermen, and all þe wirshipfull Councell of þe cite of York'.⁵⁷ Thus, as in the series of petitions which preceded this one, the mayor is addressed respectfully, but in terms which do not mark his status as being emphatically different to that of his brethern. In the remaining petitions a different principle of organisation is seen. The petition of the Spicers, submitted slightly later, is addressed to 'your ryght hygh worthynesse Mair, Aldermen and the wyse Counsell'. Though the qualification 'ryght hygh worthynesse' precedes the titles of all three levels of official, its singular form suggests reference merely to the first, the mayor.⁵⁸ In the remaining petitions distinctions between mayor and aldermen are unambiguous. In 1445 the Armourers supplicate 'thair ful honorable and gracious *lorde* the Maire'.⁵⁹ In the commons petition of 1464, and the undated submission of the craft of Marshalls, Smiths and Bladesmiths, the mayor is described as the petitioners' 'worshipfull lord', while the aldermen command the lesser title of 'worshipfull masters'.⁶⁰ In letters sent to the mayor and aldermen by the city's recorder at the close of the century, the mayor and aldermen are regularly characterised by different epithets as well as titles: 'Right honorable lord and our full worshipfull maisters'. Over the course of the following century this

⁵⁵This differentiation is found throughout Letter-Book L, which begins in 1462.

⁵⁶The Painters' petition of 1466, LB L, f. 43. See also ff. 44, 47, 53b, 96b, 109, 116b, 122.

⁵⁷James Raine, ed., *A Volume of English Miscellanies*, Surtees Society 85 (1888), p. 10.

⁵⁸YMB:III, p. 158. The date of this petition is 1433.

⁵⁹YMB:III, p. 160.

⁶⁰YMB:II, pp. 246-47; HB:I, p. 410. (Undated petition inserted at the end of House Book 2/4).

distinction in adjectives, which echoes that found at London, seems to become established as a standard formula.⁶¹

At Coventry and Bristol slightly different patterns of development are evident. In Bristol change is consistent, but takes a rather different form to that which we see at London or York. The most common form of address in the earlier English petitions is 'To the worshipfull and reverent sirs, the Mair, Shirref, Baillifs and all the worthi men of the Commune Counseill'.⁶² This formulation suggests that the councillors are now perceived as slightly different to the greater officers. In the body of petitions, however, the addressees are referred to collectively as 'your maisterschippis', suggesting that they continue to be viewed as occupying broadly similar positions in the social hierarchy. Later, as in the two cities which we have examined to this point, clearer differentiation emerges in the way in which particular officers are described. The Brewers' petition, submitted in 1479, was directed to the attention of 'oure right' worshipfull' maisters the Maire Shireef and comyn' Counsaile of the Toune of Bristowe'.⁶³ However, other petitions submitted in the final quarter of the century make a clear distinction between the 'right worshipful' mayor on the one hand, and the sheriff and common council on the other, who are addressed simply, without any epithets of dignity.⁶⁴ This echoes the language used to introduce ordinances and memoranda in the civic registers of the period; here too epithets of dignity are generally applied only to the mayor and sheriff of the town.⁶⁵

Due perhaps to constitutional changes, or perhaps to the infrequency of registration, no standardisation appears to have developed in the salutations of the petitions submitted to the leet at Coventry.⁶⁶ This city also differs in the extent to which officers are differentiated from

⁶¹ *YMB:III*, pp. 279 and 282-83. See also letters sent to the city in the early sixteenth century. Angelo Raine, ed., *York Civic Records 3*, Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series 106 (1942), pp. 79, 82, 103, 136.

⁶² Veale, ed., *Great Red Book of Bristol:II*, p. 146, dated 1455/6 [hereafter *GRB*]; *LRB:II*, pp. 181, 184 (1457).

⁶³ *GRB:II*, p. 155.

⁶⁴ *GRB:II*, pp. 150, 157 (1479); p. 159 (1483).

⁶⁵ See for example *GRB:IV*, p. 99: 'Memorandum that the XIIth Daye if the moneth of Junii in the yere of the Reigne of our Soverayn Lorde the Kyng Edward the fourth after the conquest the XVth the Right Worthy and Reverent sirs Robert Straunge Maire of Bristow and John Forster Schreef of the same and all the Right wise and discrete councell of the seide Towne...'

⁶⁶ Only six petitions survive in complete form. It is clear that many other petitions were submitted, but it is impossible to know what form they took.

one another linguistically; even in a petition of 1518, there is no clear distinction between the officers of the city and the wider 'estates' present at the Leet.⁶⁷ In broad terms, however, a trend towards the more precise articulation of ranks can be seen. In the second half of the fifteenth century ordinary citizens are regularly characterised as 'good' or 'honest'; for example, the petitioning Cappers are characterised as 'wealthy and honest persones'.⁶⁸ However, all the petitions which follow that of 1385 use more elaborate epithets, such as 'worthy' or 'worshipful', to describe the addressee.⁶⁹ Petitions of 1428 and 1435 distinguish between the 'discrete counsell' or 'hall of wurthy men' on the one hand, and the 'Reuerent Meire' and 'fullwurshipful officers' on the other.⁷⁰ From the final quarter of the fifteenth century the mayor is distinguished both from ordinary citizens and from his fellow officers by the title 'Maister'.⁷¹ This is found in third person accounts written by city clerks, but also in accounts of direct addresses from citizens to their governor.⁷²

Over the course of the fifteenth century clear distinctions had developed in the characterisation of the petitioners and their addressees, the civic governors. Though perhaps slightly less clear-cut than the trends in the description of individuals, greater differentiation also seems to emerge in the rhetoric used to grant petitions. At York, petitions had earlier been granted for the 'honesty' or 'common wele' of both craft and city. By the later fifteenth century, however, 'honesty' seems to be a term associated only with the guild arena, while more prestigious terms such as 'honour' are reserved for the description of the city. For example, the ordinances of the Listers are registered 'for the worship of the saide cite, profect of the kinges liege people, and honeste of the same craft.' Those of the Walkers are offered for 'the *honour* of the cite and *wele* of the craft.'⁷³ In Coventry similar distinctions are seen. The workers of the Cappers are required in 1496 to come to the keepers of the

⁶⁷CLB:III, p. 618.

⁶⁸CLB:I, pp. 132, 253; III, pp. 692, 708, 774, 777.

⁶⁹As at Bristol the same shift can be seen in the city's own language. After 1425, the city clerks' description of the jurors of the Leet as 'honest and lawful' (*probos et legales*) is replaced by the more prestigious term 'wurthy' (*dignas*). Compare CLB:I, pp. 36, 38, 54 with pp. 84, 108, 111, 116-17 and following.

⁷⁰CLB:I, pp. 115, 180.

⁷¹CLB:III, pp. 642, 645, 649, 654, 658, 667, 669 etc. This practice becomes common after 1497.

⁷²CLB:II, p. 575. See below p. 132

⁷³YMB:II, pp. 206-7 (1463-4). See also YMB:II, p. 276, YMB:III, pp. 270, 273, 278, 284. The last three examples date from the sixteenth century.

guild 'for þe worship of the Cite & profite of þe Craft'⁷⁴ while petitions of 1421 and 1451 justify their requests as being for the 'worship' of the city.⁷⁵ In entries which register ordinances without giving the original petition, the difference between the values associated with the guild and the city is also strongly emphasised. In the ordinances, written by the guild, reference continues to be made to the 'good', 'able' or 'honest' workers. From the second half of the fifteenth century, however, epithets of dignity are routinely used in relation to the city. At different times York is described, for example, as 'this wirshupfull cite', 'this full honorabill cite' and 'this full nobill cite'.⁷⁶

In Bristol, and particularly at London, similar trends are evident. Petitioners at London continue to describe themselves as 'good folk'. In late fifteenth century petitions guilds are also insistently characterised as 'honest'. For example, in 1454 the Horners asked not only for the enrolment of their articles 'for the honeste of the said mistier' but also sought to outlaw 'vilonious wordes or dishonest and unsittyng langage'.⁷⁷ A decade later the Painters requested that 'two trewe wittie and honest men' be elected as their wardens.⁷⁸ However, after the first decade of the fifteenth century 'honesty' is never presented as a quality characteristic of the city. Rather, as at York, the idea of the city is increasingly qualified by more elevated social epithets. At Bristol fifteenth-century petitioners often allude in their opening address to 'this worshipful Towne'. At London the adjectives 'honourable', 'famous' and 'noble' are favoured at different periods. As at York, the reasons for the granting of petitions are also expressed in formulaic terms, which explicitly resist the conflation of craft and city identity. For example, the London craft of Cooks requests that their ordinances be accepted 'for the wele of the saide Crafte and worship of the saide Citee'.⁷⁹ The Girdlers hoped that their petition would be granted 'for the honour and worshipp of this Citee and wele of the said Crafte'.⁸⁰ Though in a small number of cases Bristol petitions are still

⁷⁴CLB:II, p. 573. Similar examples can be found in the sixteenth century. CLB:III, pp. 672, 743.

⁷⁵CLB:I, pp. 35; II, p. 258.

⁷⁶YMB:II, pp. 298, 277, 284.

⁷⁷LB K, f. 276b.

⁷⁸LB L, f. 43. See also LB K, f. 5b in which the Butchers refer to 'eiusdem Mistere honestate', LB L, f. 116b in which the Horners state that in times passed they have 'honestly lived and continued within the said Citee' and f. 201 in which the Butchers petition as 'Wardeyns and oper honest men of the Craft'.

⁷⁹LB L, f. 109.

⁸⁰LB L, f. 131b. See also LB L, ff. 158, 196b, 205, 212, 228, 265b. The only exception which I have found is

granted 'pro commune utilitate honore ac meliore gubernacione communitatis ville ac Artis predicte', here too there seems to be a tendency for terms such as 'honour' and 'worship' to be restricted to the description of the town.⁸¹ For example, the Weavers at Bristol conclude:

Wherfor please it youre good maistership as well for the honoure of this worshipfull Towne as for the good rule and true dealing to be had from hensforth in the seid Crafte...⁸²

Conclusion

Over the course of the period under study quite radical reorganisation occurs in the petitionary discourse of the late medieval town. Over the second half of the fourteenth century, when petitions were written in Anglo-Norman French, three important changes can be seen. First, the officers accrue epithets of dignity; 'sages' and 'honorables'. Second, they cease to be called 'hommes' or 'gentz' and come to be addressed instead as 'sires' or 'seignours'. Third, the petitioners describe themselves with much greater humility; where earlier they had simply 'asked' for the granting of requests, now they 'beseech' their superiors. In the fifteenth century these changes are translated into English, and then extended one stage further. Petitioners continue to present themselves in terms closely equivalent to those used in French such as 'poor' or 'humble'. However, the civic officers are now clearly differentiated from one another. At London and York this extends to the adoption of a new title 'lord' by the mayor.

Interpreting Change

In chapter one we pointed to the dangers of assuming that language provides unmediated access to social 'reality' in past times. How then, should the patterns which we have found be understood? Can the developments which we have identified in petitionary rhetoric really be seen as symbolic of changing civic values, or do they reflect the reorganisation of

the petition of the Waxchangers, which requests acceptance 'no oonley to the pleasure and wele of the kynge our souerain lord and profite of his liege people but also to the honour and Worship of the said Citee and Crafte.' LBL, f. 256.

⁸¹GRB:IV, p. 101. Dated 1474. Also LRB:II, p. 122.

⁸²LRB:II, p.124. Dated 1490. See also GRB:IV, p. 119: 'be hoofull to be don for the bettir Rewle and Governauce of the said Craft and for the weell of this worshipfull Towne'. The Whitawyers refer to the 'honour' of the craft in their petition of 1477. However, I have found no other examples of the use of the terms 'honour', 'worship' or 'honourable' and 'worshipful' to a craft in the body of a petition.

language to different ends? In chapter one we saw that the style of letters was not static, but altered over the course of the two centuries of our study, in ways which ranged from the subtle to the dramatic. One possibility, therefore, is that the linguistic patterns which we have observed are produced by an alteration not in social concepts but in bureaucratic practices, or generic styles. This suggestion appears, in fact, to be supported by contextual evidence. In a recent article Nigel Saul has noted that while English kings received letters which bore elaborate salutations such as 'A tres excellent et honorable seignur' from the beginning of the fourteenth century, petitions entered in the Rolls of Parliament in the same period have much simpler formulae, such as 'Item prie la Commune'.⁸³ Saul associates change in the registration of parliamentary petitions with the reign of Richard II:

The practice ... became to address the king directly; he is called a 'prince'; and he is spoken of in the language of 'highness' and 'majesty'. The contrast with the headings used in the previous half-century could hardly be greater.⁸⁴

Saul's chronology is, in fact, mistaken. The more complex type of formulae, which Saul associates with the period after 1380, are regularly seen in parliamentary petitions enrolled in the 1340s. In 1347, for example, the following preface is found:

Treshonure et tresredoute seigneur les gentz de vre Comune esmerciant a vre tres graciouse seigneurie tant come plus scierent & poent de ceo qu'en vre haute Realte vous plest pitee & regarde avoir al grant Meschief de vre dite Commune
...⁸⁵

As we have seen, the petitions in the London Letter Books become more complex at around the same date. It therefore seems possible that the changes in London petitions are produced in imitation of generic innovations in the royal/parliamentary arena.⁸⁶

In order for this argument to hold true, it would have to be shown that the innovations we have observed were confined to petitions. This is very far from being the case. Though it is not as extensive as we might wish, some correspondence between cities does survive for this period. As we have seen, in the royal arena elaborate modes of address are seen in letters from the beginning of the fourteenth century. Civic letters, however, show a similar path of

⁸³Nigel Saul, 'Richard II and the Vocabulary of Kingship', *English Historical Review* 110 (1995): 854-877.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 857.

⁸⁵*Rotuli Parliamentorum*, 6 vols. (London, 1832): II, p. 165.

⁸⁶Though against this, one might note that the civic petitions use the more elaborate mode more consistently after its introduction than do the commons.

progression to petitions formulated in the same context. In the earliest material - ranging from the late fourteenth century to the first decade of the fifteenth - the language is simple and indeed, resembles that used in the ordinances of fraternities in this period.⁸⁷ For example, model letters from the city of London to Paris, and from York to London, copied into the Little Red Book of Bristol in the fourteenth century, open with variants of the following formula:

Dilectis amicis et vicinis Maiori et ciuibus London. Honestissimis et eiusdem Ciuitatis Communitati, sui amici et vicini Maiori et Ciues Eboraci et eiusdem Ciuitatis communitatis salutem.⁸⁸

Real letters sent by the commune of Paris to the city of London, and by Shrewsbury to York around the same time, use a similar language, referring to civic officers as 'chers freres' and 'especialx amis'.⁸⁹ After c.1430, however, a change in orientation is seen. Later fifteenth-century letters exchanged by merchants of similar status continue to use concepts such as brotherhood and friendship.⁹⁰ However, in epistolary exchanges between civic governors, as in petitions from citizens, these terms are gradually displaced by status epithets. The salutation of a letter from London to a town in Flanders, written in 1421, is addressed not 'Chers amis' but 'Treshonurez sages purvueux & discretez sires'.⁹¹ A letter sent to the same city by the mayor and aldermen of Calais in 1435 refers to the London officers as 'Fful worshipful, wise and discrete sires'.⁹² Later exchanges recorded in the York House Books show the consolidation of the same features as those seen in petitions. The mayor of York writes to the steward of Boroughbridge 'Right wirshupful sir', and in return is saluted 'Ryght honourable and wirshupful sir'.⁹³ In the early years of the following century the mayor of York presents his recommendation to 'your honourable lordship and your worshipful brethern', the mayor and aldermen of London.⁹⁴

⁸⁷For comparison see ordinances published in Joshua Toulmin Smith, ed., *English Gilds*, EETS o.s. 40 (1870).

⁸⁸*LRB*:I, p. 81.

⁸⁹*LB K*, ff. 2 (c. 1422); *YMB*:II, pp. 98-99: 'singularis amicie viris, ballivo et probis hominibus ville de Scardeburgh'.

⁹⁰Alison Hanham, ed., *The Cely Letters, 1472-1488*, EETS 273 (1975), pp. 13, 26, 39, 41, 51, 126, 143.

⁹¹*LB I*, f. cclxv.

⁹²*LB K*, f. 148.

⁹³*HB*:I, pp. 87-88.

⁹⁴Raine, ed., *York Civic Records 3*, p. 103 (1521).

By the middle of the fifteenth century the new, more elaborate modes of address are seen quite widely in civic writing. In the registers of London the expression 'Lord Mayor' becomes increasingly common in all forms of civic writing as the fifteenth century progresses.⁹⁵ In Bristol, ordinances registered in the second half of the fifteenth century are frequently prefaced by entries which refer ceremoniously to the city officers.⁹⁶ At York and Coventry we even find evidence that these titles formed part of the spoken discourse of civic governance. The York House Books record a number of occasions on which citizens were called before the civic authorities to apologise for misdemeanours. Their oral submissions, recorded verbatim in the minutes, are strikingly similar to the language of petitions. In 1483 one miscreant states, for example:

My lord the mair and all my maisterz (your bredyr), for asmoch as I have mysbyhad me ayanst you in sayng of unsytyng langwygh in the presens of my lord the mair ... I besek you my lord the maire and you my maisterz all to forgeve me.⁹⁷

Submissions of this kind are perhaps the most likely to display respect for the 'correct' use of titles. However, the same phenomenon can also be seen in less constrained settings. For example, in 1476 Thomas Wanderforth was sent to enquire the reason for the absence of one of the aldermen from city meetings. His words to the absentee, again recorded as oral speech, read:

My said *lorde maire* and and all my maisters comaund thame to you and marvels much that ye have not comen [nor] comys to the counsell when ye have bene sent for and called therto for diverse maters (con)sernyng the weill and *wirshup* of this cite ...⁹⁸

At Coventry a still more suggestive example is found. In 1496 the rebel Laurence Saunders was summoned to appear before the mayor. Though the tenor of his speech was subversive, he uses exactly the same terms of respect as we see in contemporary civic writing:

Then the seid Laurence seid in the seid Court:
"Maister Meire, hold vp-right your swerde, for as for *Maister* Recorder I haue

⁹⁵'From this year [1414] onwards the title appears from time to time, mainly in petitions and addresses, until by 1500 its use is almost general.' Geoffrey Cumberlege, *The Corporation of London: Its Origin, Constitution Powers and Duties* (London, 1950), p. 18.

⁹⁶See for example 'The Ryght' Worthi and Reverent Sieur Richard Hatter Maire of Bristowe', *GRB:III*, p. 48. Memoranda of the fourteenth century refer to civic officers in the third person without appending any titles.

⁹⁷*HB:I*, p. 279. 1483.

⁹⁸*HB:I*, pp. 60-61. 1476.

Rekened with hym before the kyng and he shall be easy Inough" etc.⁹⁹

If change does not merely affect petitions, but also other kinds of records, it could be that it does indeed reflect a shift in the ideology of the civic élites. Before we can draw such a conclusion, however, one other thesis must be considered. The period under consideration is marked by two important changes not in generic but in *linguistic* organisation. First, in the early fifteenth century, English begins to displace Latin and Anglo-Norman French as the main medium of registration in the civic context. Second, historians have suggested that the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw the elaboration of the language of social description; in the fourteenth century the 'esquire' emerges as a separate rank, while the fifteenth sees the birth of the 'gentleman'.¹⁰⁰ As we saw in chapter one above, this development is paralleled by a process of lexical reorganisation which affects precisely the kind of honorific appellations with which we are concerned here. Two questions therefore present themselves. First, do the changes which we have observed in the early fifteenth century mark a shift in the perception of civic governors, or merely a reorganisation of terms produced by transition from Anglo-Norman to English? Second, does the adoption of the vocabulary of 'honour' and 'worship' in the fifteenth century represent 'real' change, or is what we see here simply the translation of older terms of respect into a more modern social idiom?

At first sight it seems that the transition from Anglo-Norman French to English may indeed be an important factor in the changes which we have observed. In Anglo-Norman French, for example, there is only one word, 'seignour', to express the concepts described in English by the two distinct terms 'lord' and 'master'. The apparent elevation of the mayors of York and London over the course of the fifteenth century may therefore be an optical illusion; the use of 'lord' may simply mark more clearly a difference in degree which was already perceived within the city. Alternatively, the use of the title 'lord' might be a 'mistake', the result of confusion produced by the transition from one set of vocabulary to another. In the Stonor and Paston collections, for example, early writers do sometimes describe addressees

⁹⁹CLB:II, p. 575. Titles appear in the memoranda of both towns in the fifteenth century. See CLB:III, pp. 584, 607, 619, 622, 624-35, 639 etc. See HB:I, pp. 264, 279, 281, 282, 285, 286, 287, 294, 296.

¹⁰⁰D. A. L. Morgan, 'The Individual Style of the English Gentleman', ed., M. Jones, ed., *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Later Medieval England* (Gloucester, 1986), pp. 15-35; Peter Coss, 'Knights, Esquires and the Origins of Social Gradation in England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series 5 (1995):155-78.

who were mere gentlemen as 'lords'. As we have seen, the earliest London petitions apply the title 'lords' to both mayor and aldermen, while those at York use it in relation to neither group.¹⁰¹

A number of factors point strongly against such interpretations, however. In the English petitions of the later fifteenth century the mayor and aldermen of London are characterised by different *epithets* as well as by different titles. This suggests that the use of the title 'lord' in the fifteenth century represents a self-conscious attempt to distinguish the mayor from fellow officers. More importantly, it highlights the absence of such signifiers in earlier petitions. Though the Anglo-Norman vocabulary of status was less nuanced than that of fifteenth-century English, it was nevertheless possible to express different levels of respect within the terms of this system. For example, when mentioned, common councillors are clearly distinguished from civic officials in Anglo-Norman petitions. Thus the salutation of a petition from the commons of York opens 'Pleise as honourables & reuerentz seignours Meir Aldermans & bones gentz de la citee'.¹⁰² Had late-fourteenth-century petitioners perceived a marked difference in rank between the mayor and the aldermen, we might expect to see formulae which applied different adjectives to officers of various ranks, such as 'A lour *honorable* seigneur meir et a lours *sages* aldremans'. What we find instead are phrases such as 'As honorables seignours et sages meir et aldremans' which seem to conflate the two ranks. Differences between the vocabulary of Anglo-Norman and English therefore seem to account neither for the general elevation of civic officials in the late fourteenth century, nor for the failure of these petitions to anticipate later English texts in distinguishing linguistically between mayors and aldermen.

What then of the thesis that changes in petitions of the later fifteenth century reflect accommodation to a changing social vocabulary? In some cases linguistic change is indeed the product of 'fashion' rather than 'inflation'. In the civic registers of Bristol, for example, the mayor is described as 'worthy and reverent' around mid-century, but 'right worshipful' from the 1470s onwards.¹⁰³ In Coventry too, 'worthy' seems to be gradually replaced by

¹⁰¹ *PL*:II, Nos. 425, 427, 432, pp. 5, 7, 11; *SL*, No. 49, p. 130.

¹⁰² York, York City Archive, D1, f. 348.

¹⁰³ 'Worthy and reverent' are the terms used by civic authorities themselves. See *GRB*:III, p. 48; IV, p. 73, 89, 99. For the latter see also Elizabeth Ralph, ed., *The Great White Book of Bristol*, Bristol Record Society 32 (1979), pp. 114, 124.

'worshipful' as the favoured description of officers of the leet.¹⁰⁴ Though this terminological realignment might seem to betoken an increase in status, parallel changes in the salutations of letters suggest that these words had very similar denotative reference. As in petitions, 'worthy' and particularly 'reverent' are common in correspondence written around mid-century. As the century progresses, however, addressees of middling status, who had earlier been described in this way, are increasingly saluted as 'worshipful'. Indeed, the Nostell Priory treatise, written around 1500, suggests 'worshipful' as an epithet appropriate for addressees of both knightly and mercantile status, but makes no reference to the adjectives 'worthy' or 'reverent'.¹⁰⁵ In this case, therefore, lexical substitution seems clearly to reflect changes in the linguistic rather than in the social system; what we see here is the modernisation of vocabulary, rather than an attempt at elaboration.

In London and York a different pattern emerges. In the early years of the fifteenth century the mayor of London is described by similar epithets to those seen at Coventry and Bristol; he is known as 'worshipful', and very occasionally 'worthy' or 'reverent'. At York 'worshipfull' is the epithet used in all the English petitions submitted in the first half of the century. However, from the beginning of London Letter Book L, which starts in 1461, petitions open with variants of the formula 'To the full *honourable* lord and right worshipfull soueraynes the maire and aldermen of the Citee of London'. A petition of the Armourers at York, submitted in 1445 uses the similar collocation 'To thaire ful honorable and gracious lorde the Maire of the Citee of York'.¹⁰⁶ Though 'worshipfull' is again applied to the mayor of York in a petition of 1476, members of the civic elite writing letters at the end of the century follow the London pattern, saluting the officers 'Right honourable lord and our full worshipfull maisters'.¹⁰⁷ The English adjective 'honorable' may seem to be closer to the Anglo-Norman 'honorable' and 'honore' used in earlier petitions than to the terms 'worthy' and 'worshipful' used at Coventry and Bristol. However, both from the implied contrast, between the 'worshipfull' masters and 'honorable' lords, and from a consideration of a wider context, it is clear that the latter was understood as an epithet with more elevated social reference. By the end of the century, documents in both the Rolls of Parliament and the

¹⁰⁴CLB:I, pp. 186, 190.

¹⁰⁵Leeds, West Yorkshire Archive Service, NP C1/1/1, p. 141.

¹⁰⁶YMB:III, p. 160.

¹⁰⁷HB:II, p. 518.

Ancient Correspondence point to 'honourable' as an adjective which had specific reference to members of the nobility.¹⁰⁸ The language of the later petitions therefore reflects not accommodation to a new idiom, but a social repositioning - an elevation in status.

Such is the difficulty of separating sign from signifier in the discussion of meaning, that complete faith cannot perhaps be placed even in such suggestive evidence. It may, therefore, prove helpful to consider evidence of a different kind, as a way of reinforcing our conclusions. As we saw above, in the complete series of petitions preserved at London, linguistic elaboration first occurs around the middle of the fourteenth century. In the same years we can also identify attempts to bolster the prestige of the mayoralty in a different arena. In 1344 the commons petitioned the king asking that 'nul homme ne porte deinz Citees ne Burghs n'en nulle autre Ville, Maces virolez d'argent, forspris les Sergeantz les Roi'.¹⁰⁹ The offence to which the petition responds can be inferred from the king's response; no town was to carry silver maces 'forspris les Sergeantz de la Cite de Loundre, qi purront porter lour Mace ... devant le Maire de Loundres'.¹¹⁰ It seems unlikely that the perceived abuse would have preceded the petition by more than a few years. Thus in the same period that the mayor of London was elaborating his ceremonial title, it would appear that the civic authorities were also reinforcing their prestige, through the appropriation of material symbols from the royal arena.

As we have seen, the first shift, from an unadorned mode of address to one which brings ceremonious deference to the fore, is most clearly seen in the records of London. However, the second development which we noted, the elaboration and standardisation of terms of address, is clearly seen in all four cities. This second move, which occurs over the course of the fifteenth century, finds still firmer parallels in the material arena. In 1402 the commons asked the king to remedy the confusion in dress which had recently developed, probably as a result of economic change. All estates of the realm were to apparel themselves 'selonc son degre, en lessant les superfluitees'.¹¹¹ However, in the case of a handful of civic officers an exception was made:

¹⁰⁸ See Appendix 1, and chapter one above.

¹⁰⁹ *Rotuli Parliamentorum*:II, p. 155.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Rotuli Parliamentorum*: III, p. 506.

priont les Communes, q[ue] ordeigne soit en cest present Parlement ... q[ue] null Esquier use Furre de gray, cristigray, menyvere, ne bice, forspris les Mairs q[ui] sount, ount estez, ou pur le temps serrount, en les Citees de Loundres, Everwyk, ou en la Ville de Bristuyt.

In 1463, the differentiation between cities, and between civic officials of different rank, was further elaborated in a second statute. This time the commons asked:

that the Mayers of the Cite of London, that be or have been, or hereafter for the tyme shal be, and their Wyfes, may use and were such Aray as is afore lymyted unto Bachelor knyghtes, and to their Wyfes. And that such as bee or have been, or for the tyme shal be, Aldermen or Recorders of the same Cite; and also that all Maires and the Shirrefs of Citees, Tounes, and Boroughs of this Reame, such as be Shires corporat, and all Maires and Baillifs of all other Citees ... such as have been chosen or assigned, or in tyme to come shal be chosen or assigned to doo their service in the Coronation of the Kyng or of the Quene ... may use and were such Aray as is afore lymyted unto Squires and Gentilmen afore specified, havng possessions of the yerely value of XLli.¹¹²

As with the assumption of the right to bear silver maces, these petitions probably reflect practices already adopted within certain cities; the timing of innovation may not therefore be dated with any great precision. However, it seems clear that civic officers' assumption of costumes which distinguished them from ordinary citizens coincides, in broad chronological terms, with their assumption of titles of dignity.

The changes in the vocabulary of petitions do therefore seem clearly to reflect 'real' rather than purely linguistic or bureaucratic changes. The question which remains is that of causation. The obvious answer seems to lie in changes within cities themselves. Though historians no longer argue that the later Middle Ages saw the erosion of early civic 'democracy' by purely oligarchical forms of government, there does seem to be some evidence that the later Middle Ages witnessed a sharpening of social divisions in some cities.¹¹³ In 1489, for example, the role of the commonalty in the election of mayors of York was curtailed. In London civic disorder resulted in legislation which enhanced the power of the city's aldermen. Changes of this nature are not, however, either homogeneous or clear cut. A more secure explanation may lie not in the thesis that the personnel of civic governance were drawn from a narrower group, but in the idea that the principles which underlay it changed. According to Stephen Rigby :

¹¹²*Rotuli Parliamentorum*: V, pp. 504-05.

¹¹³For a useful discussion of earlier views as well as a survey of these developments see Susan Reynolds, *An Introduction to the History of English Medieval Towns* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 171-87.

Medieval town government was thus based on the potentially uneasy coexistence of the principle of rule by the 'better sort' on the one hand, with that of community's right to consultation and representation on the other. The late medieval period saw a shift in the balance of these principles which resulted in ... an emphasis on a descending concept of the rulers' authority.¹¹⁴

Rather than merely adopting terms of respect in order to express a social position which they already enjoyed, the elaboration of titles may therefore reflect a self-conscious strategy to distance civic officials from the populace. Susan Reynolds has argued that the growth of ritual in later medieval cities reflects the fact that 'burgesses, being so much of a rank, could rely relatively little on the habitual deference of a stratified society to protect the dignity of their officers.'¹¹⁵ Similar motives might be adduced for the linguistic elaboration seen in the same period.

If we examine the timing and nature of change, this does, in fact, seem the most plausible explanation. Clark and Slack have argued that cities became more hierarchical not as a function of internal factors such as economic decline, but as the result of direct intervention on the part of the crown; in response to a perceived growth in disorder, kings were eager to promote the authority of civic governors, chosen from a pool of 'reliable' men. Slack and Clark's case rests on the terms of incorporation.¹¹⁶ However, if we look closely, the same pattern seems to apply to the development of the material culture of civic governance. In the *Liber Albus*, John Carpenter argues that the mayor's right to be preceded by a ceremonial sword reflects antique privileges:

ever since England was a kingdom, the honour due to an Earl, as well in the King's presence as elsewhere, has belonged to the chief office of London, who is styled 'Mayor' so long as he continues in the office of the Mayoralty: *hence it is too that the sword is borne before him, as before an Earl, and not behind him.*¹¹⁷

However, as we have seen, the right to bear silver maces by sergeants of the city had been

¹¹⁴Stephen Rigby, 'Urban "Oligarchy" in Late Medieval England', in John A. F. Thomson, ed., *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester, 1988), pp. 62-86 at p. 81.

¹¹⁵Reynolds, *History of English Medieval Towns*, p. 180.

¹¹⁶But the most important cause was exogenous, the Crown was obsessed in the years before 1640 with the need for small knots of reliable men in every town and promoted this policy by the grant or revision of charters, and through widespread conciliar intervention.' P. Clark and P. Slack, 'Introduction' in idem, eds., *Crisis and Order in English Town, 1500-1700: Essays in Urban History* (London, 1972), pp. 1-57 at p. 22.

¹¹⁷John Carpenter, *Liber Albus: The White Book of the City of London*, ed. and trans. Henry Thomas Riley (London, 1861), p. 12.

conceded as recently as the fourteenth century, and that by direct royal grant. In other late-medieval cities, the adoption of a ceremonial sword was demonstrably the product of royal initiative; in York, for example, the sword was a gift from the sovereign.¹¹⁸ Because no charters survive to attest the granting of titles such as 'lord' to civic governors, it has generally been assumed that the civic vocabulary of social dignity was adopted speculatively, without direct royal sanction. However, the application of the expression the 'king's chamber' to London seems to occur first in a royal letter. The description of cities in terms which represent them as microcosms of the realm - as 'worshipful' and 'honourable' - also seems to find its origin in royal correspondence.¹¹⁹ Changes in the language of civic governance are too varied to reflect the direct initiative of the crown. However, it seems likely that the adoption of terms of social dignity by civic governors reflects an attempt to enhance the prestige of the patriciate accepted, and perhaps even tacitly initiated, by the crown.

Petitionary Strategies

The civic authorities in all four cities in our survey appear to have been making a conscious attempt, over the course of our period, to position themselves less as 'aldermen', or leaders of essentially solidaristic organisations, and more as 'seignours' or governors in an aristocratic mode. This change placed petitioners at a growing disadvantage; instead of appealing to men very much like themselves, guild masters were now faced with the task of approaching individuals who were differentiated from them both materially and linguistically. How was such change accommodated? Can any signs of resistance to this move be identified? For the most part, as we have seen, petitioners could not overtly challenge the new construction of civic governance. In many covert ways, however, the writers of petitions do seem either to resist the implications, or to mitigate the effects of the changes with which they were confronted. The first area in which this might be identified is in the way in which petitioners describe themselves. In contemporary petitions, or petitionary

¹¹⁸Llewellyn Jewitt and W.H. St John Hope, *The Corporation Plate and Insignia of Office of the Cities and Towns of England and Wales*, 2 vols. (London, 1895):I, p. lxix-lxxi. These swords were often the gift of the king. Seven towns and cities were granted the right to bear the sword before the mayor in the fourteenth century. The gift of a sword to the city of York is described in *YMB*:III, p. 124.

¹¹⁹Christian D. Liddy, 'The Rhetoric of the Royal Chamber in Late Medieval London, York, and Coventry', *Urban History* (forthcoming).

letters addressed to more conventional 'seigneurs', writers emphasise not simply their humility, but their personal relationship to the addressee. Such petitioners represent themselves as the 'servants' of the addressee. Alternatively they are 'orators', offering prayers for the seigneur as a kind of repayment for the granting of their requests.¹²⁰

In some civic petitions this language is also seen. The Armourers of York, petitioning in 1445 represent themselves as 'your trewe herted servauntez at our simple power'.¹²¹ At Bristol a number of fifteenth-century petitions conclude with a request that ordinances be accepted 'as we of the saide crafte shall' Pray god for youre gode estatis euyr to endure.¹²² In 1466 one John Lovegold petitioned the mayor and aldermen of London as 'your pore Oratour'.¹²³ However, what is generally striking in these petitions is the extent to which this 'seigneurial' interpretation of civic authority is resisted. While petitioners may 'beseke' their masters, and present themselves as 'humble' or 'simple', they frequently adopt positions which seem calculated to emphasise the difference between civic governance and feudal lordship. At York the Chandlers, Parchmeners and even the communalty represent themselves not as servants but as the 'povres veisyns' of the civic officers.¹²⁴ A similar strategy is adopted at Coventry by 'your pore neyghbours of þe Croschepyng'.¹²⁵ Another term which is often used is 'concitizen'. This is found in a number of petitions at both London and York.¹²⁶ At Bristol 'poueres comburgeises' and later 'humble Comburgesses' is the single most common way in which petitioners describe themselves. By using these terms petitioners seem to be emphasising two things. The first is the distinctive nature of civic authority. The second is the idea of solidarity. In defiance of the hierarchical language 'imported' from other contexts by their governors, guildsmen seem to be asserting their essential similarity to, and affinity with, their superiors.

A number of other features occur in civic petitions which could be interpreted as strategies

¹²⁰ *ACE*, pp. 176-77, 198, 206, 238 276, 283, 290 inter alia; *PL*:I, Nos. 60, 70, 294; *SL*, No. 74.

¹²¹ *YMB*:III, p. 160.

¹²² *GRB*:II, p. 159.

¹²³ *LB L*, f. 47.

¹²⁴ *YMB*:I, pp. 55, 67, 78.

¹²⁵ *CLB*:I, p. 105.

¹²⁶ *LB L*, ff. 220, 318; *YMB*:I, pp. 67, 168-69; *YMB*:III, p. 157.

which resist the repositioning of civic officers, or more precisely the erosion of the status of the petitioner, which was its concomitant. The most straightforward example is the rejection of the claims of the civic authorities to exclusive ownership of specific laudatory adjectives. Slightly different examples of this tendency can be found in three of the four towns in our study. The most direct example is found at London, in the petition of the Physicans and Surgeons, written in 1423.¹²⁷ The preface, representing the language of the city, describes the petition as relating to 'þe honeste of þe Faculte of Phisyk and þe honeste of þe crafte of Cirurge'.¹²⁸ However, in the body of the text, the petitioners choose to describe themselves in rather different terms:

Noble lordes for as moche as þat þe glorious konnyng of Phisyk and þe crafte of Cirurgy er fro day to day gretly disclaundred ... like it your lordships for þe disclaundre of so high a Facultee of Phisyk and so worthy a crafte of Cirurgy to be putte away.¹²⁹

'Glorious' is not a word conventionally used in petitionary rhetoric. However, entries in the *MED* for this period suggest that, in a secular context, this word indicated qualities of the highest order, associated particularly with kingship and military heroism. As we have seen, 'high' is a term associated with forms of lordship, primarily those found outside the city.¹³⁰ The town clerk may have sought to confine the dignity of the surgeons to the conventional guild category of 'honesty', but like their betters, the surgeons were looking to sources outside the city for ways in which to construct themselves in more authoritative terms.

The example from outside of London which is most closely comparable to this is found in the ordinances of the Textwriters, registered in York in the last quarter of the fifteenth century.¹³¹ As this entry is not written in the form of a petition, its use as an example of language selection by the guild itself might appear questionable. However its status, if not as a petition, then certainly as a document which originated within the guild, is strongly suggested by the expression 'for the well of *our* science' in one of the final clauses. The amended version, which appears a few folios further on, is clearly described as having been

¹²⁷LB K, ff. 6b-7b.

¹²⁸Ibid., f. 6b.

¹²⁹Ibid., f. 7.

¹³⁰ACE, pp. 103, 151-52, 208; PL:I, pp. 8, 64-66, 636.

¹³¹YMB:III, pp. 194-96.

submitted by the guild.¹³² Both versions contain the clause which interests here:

And that noo master, apprentice or hirdman of the said crafte be rebell or otherwise mishave theme self unto ther scherchours for the tyme being, them lauffully and curtasly serching in ther occupacion ...¹³³

The meaning of the word 'courteous', and variants thereof, is not straightforward in this period. In some cases the adverb 'courteously' seems to mean simply 'politely' or 'meekly'. There are, however, two reasons to suppose that the term might be associated with the construction of status in this context. First, where the expression 'lawful' is linked with another term in similar documents, it is usually one indicating rank or dignity. At Coventry, for example, ordinances were passed by the twenty-four 'honest and lawful men' of the Leet.¹³⁴ Second, though the words 'courteous' and 'courteously' are found comparatively infrequently in civic writing at York, the majority of uses are associated with individuals of gentle, or even knightly status. For example, the mayor and aldermen of York wrote to Sir Robert Plumpton in 1488 thanking him for his 'curtace letter'.¹³⁵ In an earlier entry Sir William Stapilton and other gentlemen of the Ainsty 'desired curtaslie' that they might be informed of the number of men in array who were required by the city.¹³⁶ Like the surgeons, the textwriters may have been seeking to construct a distinctive status for themselves within the city, by drawing on prestigious linguistic resources from outside the city boundaries.

Slightly different strategies of linguistic appropriation can be seen in two Bristol petitions. The petition of the Merchant Adventurers of 1477 and the Tuckers' petition of 1479 both begin with appropriate deference; the Tuckers describe themselves as 'humble Comburgeises', the Merchants as 'moost pore Comburgensis'.¹³⁷ However, in the exposition of their petitions both crafts carefully position themselves in such a way as to claim a stake in the honour and worship vested in the town. The Tuckers argue that every burghess ought

¹³²YMB:III, p. 207. 'All such articles comprysed within a serule of parchement which the said tixtwrytters, luminers noters turners and flurishers shewed tofore the said presens ...'.

¹³³YMB III, p. 195. The alternative version reads 'Also, that no master, apprentice, nor hieirdman of the said craft be rebell or otherwise mysbehave hym unto the serechourz for the tyme being, hyme lawfully and curtasely serching in there occupacion ...' YMB:III, p. 209.

¹³⁴CLB:I, p. 19 'probos et legales homines'.

¹³⁵Joan Kirby, ed., *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, Camden Society 5th series 8 (1996), No. 65, pp. 78-79 at p. 78.

¹³⁶HB:I, p. 237. See also HB:II, pp. 619, 633, 664.

¹³⁷GRB: II, pp. 157-59;GRB:IV, pp. 120-23. (Dated Edward IV, 17).

to take an interest in the regulation of clothmaking, partly because it is governed by statute, but more importantly:

bi cause it consernyth' in effect the honour' grounde and substaunce of al cource of Marchaundise whereupon restith' the comen wele of the seide worshipfull' Towne and contrayes ...¹³⁸

When describing themselves directly the Tuckers assume the appropriate posture of humility. However, by describing the trade in which they are engaged as 'honourable', and by depicting its prosperity as the wellspring of the town's prosperity, these petitioners quietly appropriate for themselves the qualities of honour and worship usually associated with the city governors.

The strategy of the Merchant Adventurers is slightly different. In the first part of their petition they follow the Tuckers closely, constructing authority by using terms of social prestige to describe their trade and its importance. They request:

the Reformacion of it yn especyall your most chieff noblest and ponderoust merchaundys of ... wode thencrece wherof in old tyme causyd mayntyned and susteynde the noble and prosperous felicitie of this worshipfull Town ...¹³⁹

In the second half a different strategy is seen. Contrasting the present state of affairs with that which had obtained in a more prosperous past, the petitioners go on to argue:

the gode and sadde Rule at that tyme there kepte cawsid Bristowe to stonde wel and prosperous and many yongmen of the same to encrece to grete worship and to be vertuouse ...¹⁴⁰

This emphasis on the gain of individuals is highly unusual in the context of civic petitioning. Characteristically 'singuler profit and avail' is presented as an abuse in petitions, one for which remedy may legitimately be sought from the civic authorities. The most convincing explanation for the use of such an argument here, is that the writers are attempting to assert the importance of individual members of the guild not merely to the prosperity of the town, but also to civic governance. Civic governance required the participation of the 'better' and indeed the wealthier elements of society. The petitioners might not have felt able to assert a direct claim to 'worship' as a collectivity. However, through individual members, who were able to shoulder the burdens of civic office-holding, the guild could lay indirect claim

¹³⁸GRB:II, p. 157.

¹³⁹GRB:IV, p. 120.

¹⁴⁰Ibid.

to the prestige associated with their addressees, the governors.

In this second Bristol petition the supplicants are not simply appropriating epithets of prestige; they also seem to be representing themselves functionally as analogous to those to whom they are writing. This 'strategy', the appropriation of the functions and virtues of civic governors by guild masters, was one to which mayors and aldermen, as mere office holders rather than born aristocrats, were vulnerable. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that it appears in a number of fifteenth-century petitions. One possible example is found in the London Pinners' petition of 1488. The main thrust of this petition is conventional enough for the period - the craft complains that it is being impoverished by the competition of 'foreyns'. However the particular turn taken by the argument here is both unusual and intriguing. Lack of adequate regulation had, it is claimed, led not simply to decay in this instance, but also to 'dissension amonges the yongmen and servauntes of the saide crafte and the saide Foreyns'. This dispute would have run out of control had not 'good and sadde deleberacions and direccion by the honest menne' been taken. In all of this, not one term exclusive to civic governance is used. Indeed, the masters seem almost to emphasize their lowly status by the use of the marked adjective 'honest'. However, the subtext of this passage seems to me to read rather less humbly. In describing the way in which they had settled the dispute by rational means, rather than by the violent methods preferred by the young, masters of the guild could be seen as staking a claim to those virtues of age, wisdom and discretion most commonly associated with civic governors. In restraining 'dissension', a term often used by kings to describe behaviour contrary to their will, they might be seen as taking a role in defending the 'peace and tranquillity of the city', another of the duties of civic office. More generally, there seems to be here an attempt to use the solidarity established by patriarchy - the power to control younger men - to offset the significance of the social hierarchy separating the petitioners from their addressees.

The petition of the London Fruiterers, which also dates from the latter half of the century, makes similar points in a rather different fashion.¹⁴¹ The opening gambit of this petition is straightforward enough. In former times, it is claimed, the mystery had borne their charges towards the city willingly. Now suffering impoverishment, they are no longer in a position to pay. What makes this argument stand out, however, is the way in which it is phrased. In

¹⁴¹LB L, f. 220.

former times it is stated the petitioners had been 'redy and wellewilled at all tyme to be contributory to the Charges of this Citee for the Suretie Saufgard and honour therof'. As we have seen, craft regulations were frequently described as redounding to the honour of the city, or to the city's 'wele' 'profit' or 'prosperity'. However the association made here between crafts and the conservation of the 'suretie' of the city is unusual. The safeguard of the city was, on the other hand, understood as one of the primary duties of the civic governors. In 1487 the Earl of Northumberland wrote to the mayor and aldermen of York reminding them of their obligation to provide for 'the sure kepinge and saufgard of the said cite'.¹⁴² The depiction of portcullises and watchmen on walls on the common seals of many towns also suggests the centrality of the idea of defence to the self-image of civic officers.¹⁴³ Given this, it does not perhaps seem too far-fetched to argue that, through a rhetorical sleight of hand, the Fruiterers are attempting to conflate their obligations as lowly taxpayers with the more honourable duty of maintaining not merely the reputation, but the physical security of the city.

One other gesture found in the Fruiterers' petition seems to suggest a different attempt to play on the solidarity implicit in the patriarchal position shared by guild masters and civic governors. Beyond the supervision of subaltern men, one of the key duties of the civic officers was to protect the 'weaker' members of society: servants, women and children. In his oath of office the mayor of Bristol pledged, for example, 'I shall kepe, meyntene, and defende, the Wydowes and Orphans of this forseide toune sauely in hir rights, be my power'.¹⁴⁴ In a letter of 1486 the recorder reminded the mayor and aldermen of York of their duty to repair the walls of the city, a labour which their predecessors had undertaken 'to defend theyme, theyre wifes, childre and goodes'.¹⁴⁵ Adding to their self-construction as contributors to the safety of the city, the Fruiterers remind their addressees that they too shoulder burdens of this kind, stating that they have 'no lyvyng to susteyn theym self ther wyfes and childern servauntes and Householdes but oonly by bying and sellyng of Frutes'.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴²HB:II, p. 569.

¹⁴³Gale Pedrick, *Borough Seals of the Gothic Period* (London, 1904), pp. 15-23.

¹⁴⁴L. Toulmin Smith, ed., *The Marie of Bristowe is Kalendar by Robert Ricart*, Camden Society n.s. 5 (1872), pp. 72-73.

¹⁴⁵HB:II, p. 522.

¹⁴⁶LBL, f. 220.

Different versions of the same tactic can be identified in a handful of other petitions of similar date. In 1487, for example, the Fullers petitioned the mayor and aldermen of London complaining:

many simple yonge persones the which haue been apprenticeis in the same Crafte asson as their apprentishode is expired take upon them to be householders and kepe house beyng of no substaunce nor havyng any thyng of them self to susteyn any suche charges withall'.¹⁴⁷

This practice is represented as producing an excess of apprentices, and thus causing 'grete Daungier penury and beggarie'. The aim here seems to be to persuade the city governors that the supervision of others, and responsibility for their maintenance, should be restricted to individuals such as themselves, who are not youngsters but 'elder' or 'sufficient' men. In these petitions the households seem to be depicted as a version of the city in micro; the responsibilities of older men, as household heads, are equated with those of the 'aldermen' who govern the city.

One final strategy might be identified in the petitionary context of the later medieval city. Rather than appropriating the vocabulary or functions of guild governance, petitioners could underline their own authority and present a sense of solidarity with their governors simply by demonstrating familiarity with particular linguistic or rhetorical tropes used within the city. The effect, and indeed effectiveness of such strategies depended on the petitioner's access to civic writing, and even more on the specific context in which his submission was made. For example, petitions submitted in London are usually written in what Burnley has described as 'curial prose' style.¹⁴⁸ That is, they are written in a precise and ceremonious tone, created by the use of lexical doublets and triplets, anaphoric cohesive devices, and clausal qualifiers. For example, (anaphoric devices in bold, doublets italicised):

Forasmoche as before this tyme no day in certyen hath be *lymyted or affirmed* in which the goode folkes of **the same** Craft amonge theym selff mought chese wardeyns *to reule and oversee* yeerly the *Felysshipp and werkes* of **the same** *mistier or craft* ...¹⁴⁹

As this is also the style in which the town clerks wrote, its adoption by petitioners would clearly have lent their suits a certain weight. On the other hand, as this style was adopted by

¹⁴⁷LBL, f. 233.

¹⁴⁸J.D. Burnley, 'Curial Prose in England', *Speculum* 63 (1986): 593-614.

¹⁴⁹LBL, f. 43. Painters' petition.

the great majority of petitioners, its use might have struck its recipient as simply natural, rather than as marked in any way.

A different situation obtained at Coventry. Here the majority of petitions are rather more loosely written. Although elements of curial prose are occasionally to be traced, they are not as prominent as at London, or as consistently used. As a result there is often a sharp contrast between the language of the petitioners and that of the City government whom they are addressing. Compare, for example, the prose style of the following petition:

Be hit known to you that but yif certen ordenaunes of Craftes withe-in this Cite, & in speciall the Craft of wirdrawerz, be takon good hede to, hit is like myche of the kynge pepull, & in speciall poor chapmen & Clothemakers, in tyme comeng shullon be gretely hyndered ...¹⁵⁰

And that of the ratifying paragraph which follows it:

the seyd bille afore hem was *radde, herde and vnderstonden*; And for-alsomyche as the mater of this bille is *grevous & Nuyefull* to the comen pepull, and for oder greuaunse vnto the seid wurthymen attis seid lete shewed, They willeng goode *ordenaunes and gouernanses* in this seyd Cite to be hadde in distruccion of all mysrules & mys gouernaunes the seyd wurthymen in the seyde lete han ordened ...¹⁵¹

In such a context it seems likely that those petitioners who were able to deploy the more complex style might be perceived as more authoritative or prestigious. It is perhaps no coincidence that the petition which most clearly echoes the style of language used by civic scribes was submitted by individuals who had been in the employment of the city. They write:

Besechith, zif hit lyke yow ... **your** seruantes, þat ze wull vouchesaufe be consideracion of the *good and greable* seruis þat thay haue **done yow**, and purposen to contynew **at your will** with all hur *myght and connyng* ...¹⁵²

Another petition which benefits particularly from consideration in a very specific petitionary context is that submitted by the commons at York in 1474 or 1475.¹⁵³ In this submission the commons seem to be challenging the trend to hierarchy inherent in the reorganisation of

¹⁵⁰CLB:I, p. 181. Petition of the Ironworkers.

¹⁵¹CLB:I, pp. 182-83.

¹⁵²CLB:I, p. 36.

¹⁵³YMB: II, p. 246.

titles within the city on more than one level. The commons request that chamberlains be elected from the body of men who had held the comparatively lowly position of bridgemaister; this was to be granted as 'we thynke we be all inlike prevaliged of the commonalte, which has borne non office in the cite'.¹⁵⁴ This request has specific constitutional implications, which have been discussed in some detail elsewhere.¹⁵⁵ What interests us here, however, is a different feature of this text, the language in which it is expressed. As we shall see in greater detail below, civic writing at York was becoming less northern in this period; features of regional language which occur regularly in material written before 1450 now become less common, or disappear entirely.¹⁵⁶ In this particular text, however, a number of markedly northern features are seen. For example, throughout the text the third person present indicative is given in the northern form, which ends in 's', rather than the 'th' form used in the south of England, and now also generally favoured in the House Books.¹⁵⁷ In addition to northern morphology, lexical items appear here which were disfavoured in writing produced by city scribes: 'for alsmuch' is used instead of 'forasmoche'; the commons refer to the common rente 'the *whilke*' rather than 'the which' was 'wonte to be upphald'.

It is possible, in this transitional period, that the writer of the commons petition was simply unaware of the changing relationship between Northern and Southern linguistic forms; this is perhaps reinforced by the frequency with which similar features appear in ordinances submitted by guilds in the same period. However, the rhetorical function of the petition is to remind to the city authorities of their obligations to the ordinary citizens of York; in this context, it is possible that the use of northern language may be self-conscious or marked. By expressing complaints in an idiom which was shunned in writing, but still used orally by officers of the city, the commons might have been attempting to assert a form of solidarity with their superiors which cut across notions of rank. By eschewing the southern forms now increasingly preferred by the city clerks, the commons might even be expressing opposition

¹⁵⁴Ibid.

¹⁵⁵Reynolds, *English Medieval Towns*, pp. 185-86; Jennifer I. Kermode, 'Obvious Observations on the Formation of Oligarchies in Late Medieval English Towns', in Thomson, ed., *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century*, pp. 87-105, at p. 99.

¹⁵⁶The best evidence available for dialect use in this period is found in Angus McIntosh, M.L. Samuels and Michael Benskin, eds., *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval England*, 4 vols. (Aberdeen, 1986).

¹⁵⁷Thus the communalty 'besekes'; the chambre 'rynnes in dett'; every man 'abates'.

to the kind of linguistic changes which we noted above. The use of marked regional forms may represent resistance to the assimilation of the city's officers to the hegemony of the South, as represented by the linguistic economy of London and the court.

Solidarity or privileged knowledge could be expressed through stylistic decorum or the selection of particular linguistic features. However, the same effect could be achieved through the mastery of the rhetorical tropes of particular cities. Anthony Black has written that the language of the common good occurs regularly in all political writings.¹⁵⁸ However, if we look more closely at the way in which petitions are formulated we see that this not in fact the case. For example, two petitions written from groups of tenants to their masters in the gentry correspondence do not invoke any concept of this kind in the formulation of their case. In the one case remedy is sought on three grounds 'to your worshipp, and great proffitt to your tenants and in shewing of mikle unthriftiness'.¹⁵⁹ In the other, the grievances are simply listed, the only general statement offered reading 'yore pore bedemen and tenauntes beth gretly wrongly and ungodely entreted ...'¹⁶⁰ If we consider in greater detail the petitions submitted to the civic authorities we find again that the use of the language of common good is not as general as it might at first have seemed. In London, where 'the common wele' is usually invoked in the closing clause, several petitions stand out as exceptions. One particularly clear example is the petition of the inhabitants of Fleet Street. The question at issue here was permission to build two cisterns to receive the water from a lead piping system, according to the terms of the will of the former Alderman of the city. The suit would seem to cry out for an appeal to the 'common wele', not least because the cisterns in question were to be built on common land. The idea of common utility is certainly invoked. Thus it is argued that the cisterns will serve 'the confort ease and Releef of the saide Inhabitaunz and other bye adioynyng unto theym'. Neither do the petitioners wish to appear selfish:

it shalbe lefull to every persone inhabited within the saide Citee to fetche and take watir at the saide ij sesterns at all tymes convenient at their pleasures in as ample and large wise as any of the said Inhabitaunez within Fletestrete aforesaide shall do ...¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸Anthony Black, *Political Thought in Europe 1250-1450* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 23.

¹⁵⁹Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Correspondence*, No. 31, p. 55.

¹⁶⁰*SL*, No. 74, pp. 68-9.

¹⁶¹LB L, f. 136b. 1478.

Yet this particular form of words does not occur. As ordinary freemen, rather than guild masters, these petitioners may have enjoyed only limited contact with civic governance and its language. Petitions which represent their requests as being 'for the comon wele of the people' or the 'poletique rule' of the city occur frequently and thus seem stereotyped. In fact, knowledge of this kind of political vocabulary may have been comparatively restricted. Petitioners may have resorted to such tropes not simply for the sake of economy, but as a way of demonstrating their familiarity with the language of governance.

A particularly good example of the exploitation of the particular tropes of civic writing is found in the petition of the inhabitants of Thames Street and 'Petty Wales', which was presented to the mayor and aldermen of London in 1479.¹⁶² Reading between the lines, it is clear that the main cause for complaint here was that the inhabitants of the street were annoyed by the accumulation of carts stopping to unload their wares at Billingsgate market. These carts were blocking 'their gates and doores of their shoppes and lettynge of chapmen and other persones as wold entre the same'.¹⁶³ However, like the inhabitants of Fleet Street, the petitioners were clearly aware that it was inappropriate to sue for personal benefit in a bill of complaint. Like them, they formulated a means of making their suit pertinent to the interests of the city more widely. Thus their own concerns are placed last in a list which begins rather higher in society:

The which cartes with horses stoppen the same stretes in suche inordinate wise that neither the Kyng our soveraign lorde, the Quene our soveraign lady, lordes, ladies and persones to theym attendyng, my lorde the mair, my maistres the Aldremen, merchaundes chapemen nor other persones charged with burdens or otherwise scarsly may passe...¹⁶⁴

At first sight this argument may seem slightly laughable; it is difficult to imagine lords and ladies of the realm jostled by market traders at Thames Street. However, whether or not the picture offered by the petitioners is accurate, it represents a shrewd appeal to the civic governors. The notion that London was a city in which the king and court were frequently present seems to represent if not a myth, than at least a cherished assumption of the governors of the city. In a proclamation of 1310 the tailors were forbidden from scouring

¹⁶²LB L, f, 146b.

¹⁶³Ibid.

¹⁶⁴Ibid.

furs 'so the great lords and good folks passing through Chepe and in the other great streets of the City, might not, by such manner of scouring, be disturbed or delayed'.¹⁶⁵ In 1357 the authorities issued a proclamation for the cleaning of the streets for 'a grievous and great abomination is commonly inflicted upon all the great people, as well as all others, foreigners and natives, who repair to and go within the City, and the suburb thereof, by reason of dung'.¹⁶⁶ By presenting the abuse as one which concerns the nobility, the petitioners strengthen their case. By appealing to the self-image of the city's governors, the petitioners construct themselves as insiders.

Conclusion

Over the course of the fifteenth century civic governors appear to distance themselves increasingly from their petitioners, the freemen of the boroughs over which they presided. This distancing takes two forms. In the late fourteenth century we see a simple increase in elaboration, a shift from formulae such as 'As Maire' to those reading 'As honourables seignours meir & Aldermans'. Thereafter, and increasingly following the transition into English, there is a growing tendency for civic governors to represent themselves in specifically feudal language. This is particularly true of the mayors of London and York, who assume the title 'lord', and adopt many other facets of the noble persona; identification with the qualities of 'grace' and 'honour', and the ceremonial deployment of swords and maces. However, in Bristol and Coventry too, the adoption of terms such as 'worshipful' and 'reverent' seems to represent an accommodation to a language of national governance.

The absorption of the civic elites into wider ideas of social hierarchy was not, however, complete. Though the officers of the city may have stolen the linguistic clothing of the aristocracy, their status, and the nature of their authority, continued to differ in a number of respects from that of those governors whose authority stemmed from their birth. As elected officers, albeit of an increasingly permanent kind, the governors of all four cities possessed dignity of an acquired rather than an ascriptive kind; their gentility did not express their intrinsic social worth, but rather existed as a reflection of the glory of the man whom they served, the king. This distinction allowed petitioners scope to assert not just deference,

¹⁶⁵Riley, *Memorials*, p. 77 (From LB D, f. cviii - original in Anglo-Norman French).

¹⁶⁶Riley, *Memorials*, p. 299 (From LB G, f. lxx original in Anglo-Norman French).

but solidarity and identity of interest quite different from anything seen in the petitions found in the royal arena. Thus rather than presenting themselves as the servants of the civic governors, guildsmen described themselves assertively, as 'good folk' and 'comburgesses'. Rather than asking for the redress of wrongs on the basis of the mercy or 'tenderness' - the aristocratic condescension of their superiors - petitioners drew attention to the similarities which bound them to their addressees. Like their governors, they were older men with the responsibility of guiding and controlling the young. Like them they protected and provided for the weaker members of society. The tenants of a lord or gentleman made little contribution to his superior's welfare, save for their financial contribution. The members of the guild, on the other hand, could draw attention to their role in sustaining the prosperity of the city, and in contributing to its safeguard and defence. They could also hint at their eligibility to succeed their addressees as governors in their own right.

One other characteristic strongly distinguished the civic arena from petitionary contexts of other kinds. Petitions submitted to the possessors of inherited or ascriptive lordship were occasional; different writers explain their case in a variety of terms which draw on a general idiom of deference and reclamation. In cities, by contrast, continuity of registration bred the development of divergent and particularised petitionary traditions. From one view this was oppressive, a means of constraining the expression of the writers; the highly tightly controlled process of registration seen at London suggests an attempt on the part of the city officers to impose their own account of civic governance on petitioners. This contrasts with the situation at Coventry and York, where a more erratic process of registration appears to have promoted a less consistent idea of city officers. However, the development of coherent body of rhetorical and linguistic tropes, which was promoted by the preservation of petitions, also created opportunities for the petitioner. By referring to particular shibboleths of the city - myths or forms of language which were particularly prized by the city officers - petitioners could construct themselves as authoritative insiders in the process of civic governance. By mastering its changing tropes, petitioners could construct a new kind of linguistic solidarity, to replace that lost when civic governors replaced the language of fraternity with that of feudal service.

CHAPTER THREE:
THE CITY AND THE REALM

In the previous chapter we examined the evolving culture of intra-city negotiation. The present study will complete the picture by considering epistolary transactions of a different kind, those directed towards individuals and institutions located outside the city. The starting point for this case-study is a series of letters sent by the mayor and aldermen of London to Henry V between 1417 and 1421.¹ These letters, and a handful of later examples, will be compared to a group of correspondence composed by the governors of the city of York in the final quarter of the fifteenth century. The second body of evidence, which has not hitherto attracted the same attention as the London series, has been selected for two reasons. First, York is the only city for which more than fragmentary epistolary evidence survives for the fifteenth century; the otherwise rich records of Bristol, Coventry, Leicester and Reading contain few letters.² Second, York forms in many ways the ideal comparison to London. As we have seen, in the fifteenth century York was the only city to imitate London's campaign to elevate the mayor to 'noble' status. In the later medieval period the city was also represented as a rival to the capital by other commentators. In a commons petition of around 1400 the city is described as 'une citee de graunde reputacioun & tudys nomee la secounde citee du roialme'.³ In 1536 Lord Darcy wrote to the mayor of York, addressing him as the leader of the second city of the realm.⁴ In this chapter three aspects of epistolary discourse will be examined. The first is the material features of these texts, as represented by seals. The second is the literary dimension of these texts, the third their linguistic characteristics.

¹R. W. Chambers and Marjorie Daunt, eds., *A Book of London English* (Oxford, 1931), pp. 62-89.

²The volumes of Ancient Correspondence in the PRO also contain sparse evidence of civic correspondence for this period.

³York, York City Archive, D1, f. 348.

⁴*Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, ed. J. S. Brewer, J. Gairdner and R. Brodie, 21 vols. (London, 1862-1910; vol. 1 revised by R. Brodie, 1920), XI, No. 627. Cf. W. M. Ormrod, 'York and the Crown Under the First Three Edwards', in *The Government of Medieval York*, ed. S. Rees Jones (York, 1997), pp. 14-34; Sarah Rees Jones, 'York's Civic Administration', in *The Government of Medieval York*, ed. Sarah Rees Jones (York, 1997), pp. 108-40.

Seals and Civic Identity

In the first chapter of this thesis we noted that earlier scholars had focussed on the 'contents' of letters; little attention had been paid to their material characteristics or 'form'. In our second case study, which explores the conventions of family letters, features of presentation such as layout and handwriting will form an important category of analysis. The aim in the present chapter will also be to compare and contrast the different semiotic levels of letter-writing practice. Here, however, our attention will not be focussed on the graphic or spatial aspects of the documents. The letters of London and York do not survive in their original form; the texts which we shall be examining are copies which were transcribed into registers at the time of despatch. In this case the visual organisation of the letters which were actually sent cannot be evaluated with any confidence. In one other area of material practice, however, the evidence of the civic arena is particularly rich. On most letters found in family collections seal impressions have either been destroyed or survive in damaged form. The matrices of some personal seals are extant, but these are comparatively few, particularly for individuals of non-aristocratic status. In cities, by contrast, ample testimony of seal designs and practice can be found.⁵ At both London and York the matrices used to seal the letters under consideration in this chapter remain in the possession of the corporation.⁶ Indeed, in both cities the common seals remain in use, in modified form, to the present day.

Seals are a relevant source for the present study because of the intimate relationship which they have to the letters which they close. In the words of the *dictator* Conrad of Mure: 'For just as two things make up a human being, body and soul, so also do two things make up a letter, the force of the words, which acts like a soul, and the seal, which acts like a body.'⁷

⁵Seals were not, of course, only used to close letters. According to T. A. Heslop 'things as varied as personal gifts, or correspondence, caskets or relics, or bundles of wool could be sealed'. T. A. Heslop, 'English Seals in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries', in Jonathan Alexander and Paul Binski, eds., *The Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England, 1200-1400* (London, 1987), pp. 114-117 at p. 114. However, as we saw in chapter two above, seals were considered an integral part of letters.

⁶Most of the letters in this study would probably have been closed with the mayoralty seal. See for example London letters of 1418 and 1421 which end with the statement 'vnder þe seal of þe Mairalte'. LB I, ff. ccxvi, cclxiii. However, other letters which make no allusion to the seals are said to be from the commons as well as the governors of the city, and may therefore have been sent under the common seal. At least one of the York letters was certainly sent under the common seal. *HB:I*, p. 47.

⁷Quoted in Martin Camargo, 'Where's the Brief? The *Ars Dictaminis* and Reading/Writing Between the Lines', *Disputatio* 1 (1996):1-12 at p. 9. The original reads 'Sicut enim hominem duo perficiunt, corpus et anima, sic

However, they have a firm claim to represent civic identity on two other grounds. First, as James Tait noted in 1936, the appearance of municipal seals is closely tied to the emergence of towns within the medieval body politic.⁸ Civic seals first appear at the end of the twelfth century, when many towns were beginning to develop an articulated structure of governance. By the later Middle Ages the connection between urban status and the possession of a seal appears to have become 'formulaic'; the use of a common seal was one of the privileges granted by charters of incorporation. Conversely, the possession of a common seal was often now understood as a symbol of corporate identity.⁹ The second way in which seals offer a useful insight into the self-perception of cities and their governors is not legal but rather iconographic. As Brigitte Bedos-Rezak has shown, civic seals emerged at a time when the sigillographic repertory of other orders of society was already firmly established.¹⁰ The response of cities to these extant sigillographic vocabularies - either appropriation, manipulation or rejection - offers a subtle gauge of how cities perceived themselves in relation to other forms of authority and identity in late medieval society. As we shall see, though they appear at first to be quite limited, iconographic conventions could be inflected in a number of ways, creating surprisingly differentiated effects.

Let us begin, then, by considering the civic seals owned by the city of London. The first seal, and in most ways the most interesting, is the 'seal of the barons', or the Common Seal [Plate 14]. This seal was probably minted in the early thirteenth century; it is first known from documentary sources in 1219.¹¹ This is an artistic artefact of considerable

et litteram duo perficiunt, virtus verborum, que se habet ad modum anime, ac sigillum, quod se habet ad modum corporis'. Ibid., n. 20, p. 17

⁸James Tait, *The Medieval English Borough* (Manchester, 1936), p. 235.

⁹Ibid., p. 236. See also Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, 'Towns and Seals: Representation and Signification in Medieval France', *Bulletin of John Rylands Library* 72 (1990): 35-48 at p. 41.

¹⁰Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, 'Women, Seals and Power in Medieval France, 1150-1350', in Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, eds., *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens, Georgia, 1988), pp. 61-82; Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, 'Medieval Seals and the Structure of Medieval Society', in H. Chickering and T.H. Seiler, eds., *The Study of Chivalry: Resources and Approaches* (Kalamazoo, 1988), pp. 313-72.

¹¹Jewitt and Hope suggest that the common seal of London dates from the early thirteenth century. Ll. Jewitt and W.H. St John Hope, *The Corporation Place and Insignia of Office of the Cities and Towns of England and Wales*, 2 vols. (London, 1895):I, p. xciii. Tim Heslop suggests a date around 1219, based on the first reference to the seal in documentary records and also on the style of the engraving. Alexander and Binski, eds., *The Age of Chivalry*, p. 273.

sophistication, and, at first sight, almost daunting complexity. Not only is the seal double-sided, but both obverse and reverse bear designs which combine figural and architectural motifs. If, however, we consider each feature in turn, and place it in its proper sigillographic context, we begin to see how the owners of the seal wished to project themselves. If we examine the iconography of the seal, two main categories or groups of interests seem to predominate.

The first of these concerns is religion. On the obverse of the seal, the figure of St Paul looms above a city skyline dominated by the image of the cathedral, and bristling with the spires of the smaller churches of the city. On the reverse, the central space is occupied by St Thomas Becket, flanked on either side by groups of men, one of which seems to consist of members of the clergy. The theme of religion is also present in characteristics of the seal less apparent to the modern eye. As we noted earlier, civic governors seeking to commission seals in this period had mainly to draw on the examples of personal and ecclesiastical sigillography; only a small number of civic seals were produced in England before the beginning of the thirteenth century.¹² In the case of the London common seal, one religious institution appears to have exerted an important, though hitherto unrecognised, influence. The depiction of groups of figures, seen on the reverse of the seal, is extremely rare on both ecclesiastical and secular seals produced in England in this period.¹³ The only parallels which I have been able to identify are the seals of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, both of which date from the thirteenth century,¹⁴ and that of the chapter of St Paul's, made in the twelfth.¹⁵ Given both the geographical and the chronological propinquity of their production, it seems highly likely that the city's design was inspired by that of the cathedral chapter.¹⁶

¹²Jewitt and Hope, *Corporation Plate and Insignia*:I, p. xciii.

¹³This contrasts with France, where this motif was often found on civic seals. See Brigitte Bedos, *Corpus des sceaux français du Moyen Age. Tome 1: Les Sceaux de villes* (Paris, 1980).

¹⁴Walter de Gray Birch, *Catalogue of Seals in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum*, 6 vols. (London, 1887), II, pp. 36 and 148, Nos. 4722 and 5253.

¹⁵Birch, *Catalogue of Seals*:I, p. 299, No. 1963.

¹⁶If this were so, it might not, in fact, represent the only example of borrowing from the authorities of St Paul's found in the iconography of the city's seal. Richard Fitzreal, Bishop of London from 1189 to 1198, owned a counterseal depicting St Paul 'with nimbus, sword in r[ight] h[and] and book in l[eft] h[and] seated on a

The primary motive for the selection of these images must be the simple and obvious one of piety; the officers of London wished to present the city, and themselves as its governors, as a model of spiritual probity. Yet beyond this obvious intention, other, more interesting values and motives can perhaps be identified. The most important of these would seem to be an interest in locale; the construction of the city not as a legal institution, but as a entity with specific, perhaps even emotional, resonance. On the reverse of the seal, for example, St Thomas's presence is explained by the marginal legend '+ME QUE TE PEPERI NECESSES THOMA TUERI'.¹⁷ The invocation of the saint is therefore spiritual, but it is also based on an idea of the city as a place or community of a particular character, demanding a specific kind of allegiance. The same interpretation could be offered of the emphasis on the cathedral in both explicit and more subtle vocabularies. Though located within the city, St Paul's cathedral enjoyed a separate institutional identity to the corporation.¹⁸ Beyond the spiritual values of referring to the patronal saint, the representation of the cathedral and its patron may therefore reflect a desire to emphasise the close relationship between the corporation and the local religious institution. There seems to be an attempt to draw on the authority, or even to pattern the identity of the city on that of the venerable local institution.

The second group of concerns evident in London's Common Seal is that which relates to the secular sphere. In this context the theme of locality is counterbalanced, or even overshadowed, by an interest in the position of the city on a wider stage. One clear example of the relationship between the two themes is seen in the depiction of St Paul. In images on the seals of the cathedral the saint bears two religious symbols; in one hand he holds the sword of martyrdom, in the other a book. On the city's seal, however, the book is replaced by the banner of England. Thus the local, religious theme is tempered by more centralising, national priorities. Similarly, where St Paul's is accorded spatial centrality, images of secular

rainbow', an image which closely resembles the image of St Thomas on the reverse of the London seal. Like figure groups, there appear to be no parallels for this image either among the seals of other cathedrals or those of religious houses; most saints on the seals of cathedrals and religious houses are depicted enthroned in architectural niches. Again, it seems probable that origins of the London image lie with the cathedral. Birch, *Catalogue of Seals*:I, p. 287, No. 1902; J. Harvey Bloom, *English Seals* (London, 1906), p. 192.

¹⁷'Cease not, Thomas, to guard me who gave thee birth'.

¹⁸ Indeed, the two institutions often came into conflict. See Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of London Letter-Books K*, pp. 360-61.

buildings are more prominent, particularly on the obverse. As we have seen, London governors cherished an idea of the city as the resort of the nobility; this idea seems underscored here by the representation of Baynard's Castle on both sides of the seal.¹⁹ More prominent still, and also perhaps more readily recognisable, is the image of the Tower of London, which appears on both sides of the seal. In the late twelfth century, when the seal was made, the Tower of London had yet to acquire its function as royal mint, arsenal, and documentary repository.²⁰ But even at the time at which the seal was first made, the Tower was a building of considerable symbolic importance. The representation of what one recent commentator characterises as 'the principal castle of medieval England', on not one, but both sides of the seal, suggests an attempt to highlight the position of the city as the seat of the king's government, and hence its role as the capital of the realm.²¹

An interest in demonstrating the city's special relationship to the king can, in fact, be traced in the subtle details of this seal, as well as in its overt iconography. Though the imagery of the saints seems to make allusion to local ecclesiastical patronage, the disposition of the figures might also, simultaneously, be read as referring to royal iconography. The instrument of St Paul's martyrdom, held aloft above the city, could be equated with the royal sword of state, with which kings were depicted symbolically defending the realm on the obverse of their Great Seals [Plate 15]. The image of St Thomas enthroned forms an even closer parallel to the reverse of the Great Seal, on which English kings were traditionally shown seated, dispensing justice. This double parallelism could perhaps be understood as accidental - the product of an overlap in religious and secular vocabularies of power, which dates back to the appropriation of Christocentric imagery by the German emperors in the tenth century.²² A deliberate, if subtle, allusion to the royal sphere would, however, sit well the appropriation of royal style evident in other aspects of London's sigillographic repertoire. According to Heslop the common seal of London was made by the same craftsman as

¹⁹Heslop identifies the image as Baynard's Castle in Alexander and Binski, eds., *Age of Chivalry*, p. 273.

²⁰Ministry of Public Buildings and Works, *Guide Books, The Tower of London* (London, 1967), pp. 3-5; Geoffrey Parnell, *English Heritage Book of the Tower of London* (London, 1993), pp. 52-53.

²¹Parnell, *Tower of London*, p. 52.

²²Bedos-Rezak, 'Medieval Seals and the Structure of Medieval Society', p. 321.

Henry III's Great Seal.²³ The second mayoralty seal of the city, engraved in the late fourteenth century, also stands in a very close relationship to royal seal-making. The style of this seal, with its 'projecting canopies and auxiliary figures', is directly based on Edward III's Brétigny Seal [Plates 16, 17].²⁴ Indeed, the relationship is obvious even to the untrained eye.²⁵ The implication of this imitation, that the crown was the most important audience in the minds of London governors when commissioning their seals, finds some support in a later documentary source. An entry in London Letter Book P notes the introduction of a new signet for the mayor (now lost) in 1537:

Item at thys Day a newe Sygnet for letters to be Sealed and to be Sent to the kinges hyghnes or other for busynes of this Cytye...was made at the charges of this Cytye.²⁶

Invocation of the city's close relationship with the king was one way of staking a claim to uniqueness, but other, more subtle strategies can also perhaps be identified in this seal. Given the early date of the common seal of London, the many features which distinguish this example from other civic seals cannot be regarded as intentional. However, obvious models for the designers did exist, in the form of the common seals of religious institutions. Though we have identified some specific similarities between London's common seal and contemporary examples belonging to English religious houses, rather more striking is the extent to which the London seal differs from these putative models. First, where the early seals of religious houses characteristically depict *either* a patronal saint *or* a church building, the London example combines the two.²⁷ Indeed, it does so on both sides of the seal. More like the London seal than that of any English religious house, in its integration of a full-scale

²³'The similarity between various details and features of Henry III's first Great Seal suggests that the London seal too, is the work of Master Walter de Ripa, active in the late teens and twenties of the [thirteenth] century.' Alexander and Binski, eds., *Age of Chivalry*, p. 273.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 274.

²⁵Plates 16-17.

²⁶Jewitt and Hope, *Corporation Plate and Insignia:II*, p. 122 (From Letter Book P, f. 127).

²⁷Common seals belonging to Benedictine and Augustine Houses in England combine saints with architectural images, but the earliest examples in this series date from the thirteenth century. P. D. A. Harvey and A. McGuinness, *A Guide to British Medieval Seals* (London, 1996), p. 103.

figure and an architectural setting, is a seal produced outside Britain.²⁸ On the civic seal of Cologne, as on the reverse of the London seal, a saint is shown enthroned in an architectural surround. The primary difference is that in the Cologne example the semi-circular motif (considered symbolic of the Heavenly Jerusalem by some critics) is placed around the saint's head rather than beneath his feet [Plate 18].²⁹ Both the date of the first Cologne seal and the strong commercial links between this city and the English capital make imitation a practical possibility.³⁰ Perhaps most importantly, as both a wealthy and powerful trading city, and as a well-known centre of goldsmithing in this period, Cologne had considerable prestige as a model.

The second area in which the London seal differs from other English examples may also point to an attempt to create prestige on an international stage. Though a small number of civic seals, such as that of Shrewsbury, do show city-scapes, rather than the buildings or saints found on the majority of medieval examples, the common seal of London stands quite alone in English sigillography in the broad topographical accuracy of its self-representation [Plate 19]. In the period at which London's common seal was engraved, only two cities were presented in this kind of detail in any artistic arena. One of these cities is Jerusalem, of which detailed maps survive from the mid-twelfth century onwards.³¹ The other is another city of pilgrimage: Rome. In the words of Lavedan:

Hors de Palestine, c'est la seule cité pour laquelle, de bonne heure, on ait fait vraiment effort afin d'obtenir une représentation exacte, notamment le tracé des rues, c'est-à-dire un plan.³²

²⁸Toni Diederich, 'Siegel als Zeichen städtischen Selbstbewußtseins', *Anzeiger des germanischen Nationalmuseums* (1993): 142-152 at p. 142.

²⁹Das Siegel zeigt den auf einer Bank thronenden hl. Petrus inmitten einer aus zahlreichen Türmen, Türmchen und Zinnen bestehenden Architektur, die vordergründig ein schematisches Bild der Stadt, hier der Stadt Köln liefert, darüber hinaus aber auf das in der Apokalypse ... beschriebene himmlische Jerusalem anspielt'. *Ibid.*, pp. 142-44.

³⁰The first contact between London and the Frankish realm is recorded in 1000 A.D.; by 1130 Cologne merchants are known to have been resident in London. For the extent of contacts between the two cities in this period see Joseph P. Huffman, *Family, Commerce and Religion in London and Cologne: Anglo-German emigrants, c.1000-c.1300* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 9-13. Seals of other imperial cities, such as Mainz, Erfurt and Aschaffenburg are of similar design and also date from the twelfth century. They may also have exerted an influence on the London seal. Diederich, 'Siegel als Zeichen', pp. 144-45.

³¹P.D.A. Harvey, *The History of Topographical Maps* (London, 1980), pp. 70-72.

³²P. Lavedan, *La représentation des villes dans l'art du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1954), p. 14.

As we have seen, Diederich thought the Heavenly Jerusalem an influence on the seals of the imperial cities of Germany. In the case of the London seal, however, Rome seems a more likely model, for in this period 'realistic' images of Rome were available in the sigillographic sphere, on the reverse of the seals of the Holy Roman Emperors. The finest seal in this series, that of Emperor Ludwig, has been described as 'a veritable gazetteer' of the monuments of the Eternal City [Plate 20].³³ The first example, that of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (1152-1190), antedates the London seal, making imitation possible.³⁴ Diplomatic negotiations between Kings of England and the German Emperors, concerning the liberties of German merchants in London, make it possible that this seal served as an inspiration to London's city's governors.³⁵ Without direct documentary evidence the models of London's seal cannot be firmly established. But if influence is admitted, it would seem to confirm that London was interested in constructing itself as a city not just of national, but of international standing.

Let us now turn, for comparison, to the seals at York. Unlike London, where the early thirteenth-century seal continues to serve down to the present day, the city of York has had two common seals. The first seal, made before 1206, depicts St Peter holding a banner and keys on the reverse, while the obverse shows a fortified building of some kind [Plate 21a].³⁶ The second seal, which was in use by 1335, presents slightly more sophisticated versions of the same images. On the reverse St Peter now stands on a bracket, flanked by two angels holding candlesticks [Plate 21b]. The building on the obverse is now more readily identifiable as a 'triple-towered castle with a masoned and embattled keep'.³⁷ At first sight

³³Cherry states that 'No fewer than twelve identifiable monuments appear dominated by the Colosseum. The river Tiber divides the city and among the other identified buildings are the Pantheon, Trajan's column, the pyramids of Cestius and in the centre the Capitol.' John Cherry, 'Imago Castelli: the depiction of castles on medieval seals', *Château Gaillard* (1992):83-90 at p. 83.

³⁴Harvey, *History of Topographical Maps* (London, 1980), p. 70; Otto Posse, *Die Siegel der deutschen Kaiser und Könige von 751-1913*, 5 vols. (Leipzig, 1981): I, p. 50 (Plate 21).

³⁵Huffman, *Family, Commerce and Religion*, pp. 15-17, 20-22.

³⁶R. B. Pugh and K.J. Allison, 'The Seals, Insignia, Plate, and Officers of the City', in Peter M Tillott, ed., *A History of Yorkshire: the City of York*, Victoria County History (1961), pp. 544-46, at p. 544; Birch, *Catalogue of Seals:II*, No. 5542.

³⁷Pugh and Allison, 'Seals, Insignia, Plate', p. 544; Birch, *Catalogue of Seals:II*, No. 5543.

the two common seals of York seem to strike a similar balance of values to the barons' seal at London. As in the capital, the sacral dimensions of the seal suggest an interest in, and dependence upon, local patronage. Indeed, where London's iconographic debt to the seals of the cathedral must remain a matter of conjecture, at York the iconographic relationship is quite clear. The legend on the reverse of the York's first common seal reads, 'Sigillum Ecclesie San[cti Pet]ri Cathedralis Eboracensis'. This suggests that the first seal was actually a copy of that owned by the cathedral chapter, a fact which makes of the city's symbolic dependence on the older, local institution unambiguous.³⁸ The image of 'a tall square embattled tower' on the obverse of the two common seals also seems to parallel the iconographic concerns of the capital.³⁹ If understood as the barbican of York castle, the city has chosen the building most closely associated with royal authority as its ideogram. Indeed, around the period at which the second seal was made, York castle housed the royal treasury and courts, making it a close corollary to the Tower.⁴⁰ Like their peers at London, the civic officers of York therefore appear to be invoking royal iconography, as a way of suggesting the prestige of the city on the national stage. As at London there appears to be a balance between local, religious concerns, and a wider ambition to portray the city as a loyal servant of the king, and as an important centre within the English polity.

On closer inspection, however, it seems that there may be some important differences in the self-construction of the two cities. This emerges more clearly if the first and second seals are considered separately. Pugh and Allison have suggested that the image on the obverse of the first seal, like that on the second, is that of 'a triple-towered castle'.⁴¹ It would be possible to interpret this in quite a different fashion, however. First, in the period at which this seal was produced, castles do not appear to have formed an established part of the sigillographic vocabulary of towns.⁴² The second problem arises from more detailed

³⁸Discussed in Rees Jones, 'York's Civic Administration', pp. 120-21.

³⁹Jewitt and Hope, *Corporation Plate and Insignia*:II, p. 466.

⁴⁰Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments of the City of York, Volume II: The Defences* (London, 1972), p. 59.

⁴¹Pugh and Allison, 'Seals, Insignia, Plate', p. 544.

⁴²None of the civic seals produced before 1200 bears the image of a castle. Exeter's seal of 1180 shows a hall or shrine; Taunton's seal, also engraved around 1180, shows a similar type of building; at Gloucester the building

scrutiny of the image. As we have seen, Jewitt and Hope are less confident that this building is intended as a castle. Perhaps even more important is the fact the image on the seal seems to be that of a masoned structure. Yet York castle, the building of which we would expect this image to be a portrait, was not rebuilt in stone until the mid thirteenth century, twenty-five years after the production of the first seal.⁴³ The stone bars, or gates, of the city are known, on the other hand, to have been completed by 1212; at this date the expression 'infra quattor Portas Eboracii' is applied to dwellings within the city.⁴⁴ The close chronological coincidence of the gates' completion and the seal's production is highly suggestive.⁴⁵ If intended to represent one of the bars rather than the castle, then the meaning of this seal becomes very different to that of London, engraved at a similar date. The gates of a city could form the backdrop to pageants of royal entry. Yet they also, and indeed more frequently, functioned as the symbolic point of contact between the city and visitors from the more immediate area, including the city's own suburbs. When first created York's common seal might therefore have privileged the theme of locality on both obverse and reverse. The image of civic identity would have been an essentially self-orientated one, which emphasized a sense of pride in locality in both spiritual and secular vocabularies.

York's later seals present a slightly different prospect. Though the image on the obverse of the first common seal may be that of a gate, it does seem likely that the more coherent design on the second seal portrays York castle.⁴⁶ The impression that interest in identifying

may be a guildhall. Jewitt and Hope, *Corporation Plate and Insignia*:I, pp. 228 and 136; II, pp. 308. Other seals show ships or other unidentifiable buildings. The only seal produced around this date which does clearly seem to show a castle is that of Scarborough. However, this building is set by the sea, and differs from the stereotyped triple-towered shape found in so many seals of later date. Jewitt and Hope, *Corporation Plate and Insignia*:II, p. 548. As we shall see below, it therefore seems likely that the towered castle motif, which is common in the fourteenth century, reflects the influence of the seals for recognisance of debt and of sheriffs issued by the crown.

⁴³Rebuilding of the castle in stone commenced in 1244 and was completed in 1270. R.B Pugh, 'The Castle and the Old Baile' in Peter M Tillott, ed., *A History of Yorkshire: the City of York*, Victoria County History (1961), pp. 521-29 at p. 521.

⁴⁴Bootham Bar was built around 1150, Micklegate in 1195/6. *Historical Monuments of York: The Defences*, pp. 10-11.

⁴⁵It has also been suggested that the image on the obverse of this seal might be that of York Minster. This would seem to be supported by the marginal inscription on the reverse of the seal, and also perhaps by the flanking structures on the building image, which might be interpreted as flying buttresses. If this argument were accepted, then the conclusion would be the same; York privileges local attachments above status on a national stage.

⁴⁶An evolution of this type, away from a gate motif and towards a castle, seems to occur in the closely

with the crown had grown at the expense of more local concerns seems supported by consideration of the fourteenth-century mayoralty seal. With its lions of England, ostrich feathers and a coronet, this seal clearly reflects a close interest in the imitation or appropriation of royal iconography [Plate 22a].⁴⁷ Yet even when this is taken into account, clear, if subtle, differences remain apparent in the sigillographic iconography of London and York. First, while the Tower of London in the thirteenth century was the repository of royal arms, jewels and muniments, the castle at York was a royal outpost, inhabited more frequently by the sheriff than by the king. The status of York castle was not something which the city governors had the ability to influence. What is interesting, however, is that rather than concealing the castle's lack of distinction, the image on the seal tends to emphasise it. The representation of the Tower on London's common seal is detailed and specific, while the images of the city are detailed and topographically accurate. The castle image on the York seal is, by contrast, schematic and generic. It differs little from the images found on the seals of many other inland towns in the same period [Plate 24].⁴⁸ In contrast to the London seal, which portrays the city as unique within the national polity, and perhaps even of international standing, that of York presents the city merely as one of many substantial towns in late medieval England.

There may, in fact, be a specific reason why the image on York's seal is both so simple, and so similar to that of other inland towns. It seems likely that this seal, and those of many contemporary towns, were influenced by the royal seals issued to towns for recognisance of debt, under the provision of the statutes *Acton Burnell de Mercatoribus* (1283) and *Statutum Mercatorum* (1285).⁴⁹ York would have received its version of this seal, which bore a half-length figure of the king with a triple towered castle on either side of his head, shortly before the creation of the city's second seal [Plate 22b].⁵⁰ If this is the inspiration

contemporary seals of Gloucester. Jewitt and Hope, *Corporation Plate and Insignia*:I, p. 228. See also Canterbury in *ibid*, pp. 319-20.

⁴⁷Jewitt and Hope, *Corporation Plate and Insignia*:II, pp. 466-67.

⁴⁸See for example, the thirteenth-century seals of Colchester and Harlech and the fourteenth-century seals of Warwick and Pontefract. Jewitt and Hope, *Corporation Plate and Insignia*: I, p. 196; II, pp. 88, 383 and 539.

⁴⁹Cherry, 'Imago Castelli', p. 86.

⁵⁰York's acquisition of a seal of Statute Merchant is dated to 1283 by Pugh and Allison in 'Seals, Insignia, Plate', p. 545.

for York's second common seal, then the contrast between the northern and southern cities is all the plainer. Where London subtly appropriates aspects of the king's *own* iconography - and that on more than one occasion - the image on the seal of York would be one of *delegated* authority. While London assimilates the idea of royalty into its own identity, York's seal emphasizes the idea of *service* to the crown. The governors of York may wish to suggest their loyalty to the crown, but they do not appear to be arguing for any peculiarly intimate relationship. Neither uniqueness nor the aristocracy seem to be central concerns of York's governors.

If we examine the more technical aspects of the seal, and compare them to equivalent features of London's seals, a similar contrast emerges. The matrix of the second common seal of York was made of silver.⁵¹ As most civic seal matrices were made of cheaper metals, such as latten or brass, this suggests a certain ambition on the part of the civic governors of York.⁵² Critics have described the York seals as being of above-average technical quality. The second common seal is, for example, characterised by Pedrick as 'meritorious' and 'exceptionally good'.⁵³ The fact that the seal is double-sided also suggests that York was seeking to position itself as a city of status.⁵⁴ However, in a number of respects York's common seal is noticeably less sophisticated than that of London. For example, York's seals do present figures in architectural settings. Both common seals also bear simple marginal inscriptions rather than London's invocation to its patron saint. The earliest seals of London and York were produced at a similar date; it is unlikely that the craftsmen who made York's first common seal had seen that of the metropolis. By the thirteenth century, however, when the second York seal was commissioned, the common seal of London must have been familiar to the officers of the northern city. Other seals which resemble that of London, with their complex iconography and their sophisticated marginal legends, would also have been familiar by this period [Plate 24].⁵⁵ Why, then did York refuse the opportunity to emulate

⁵¹Pugh and Allison, 'Seals, Insignia, Plate', p. 544.

⁵²Jewitt and Hope, *Corporation Plate and Insignia*:I, p. xciv.

⁵³Gale Pedrick, *Borough Seals of the Gothic Period* (London, 1904), p. 137.

⁵⁴Alexander and Binski, eds., *Age of Chivalry*, p. 273. Heslop notes both that this type of seal was expensive, and that it 'allowed quite complex imagery'.

⁵⁵Harvey and McGuinness have identified an élite group of seals of which the common seal of London is the

these models? One reason for the retention of a format like that of the first seal might be simple conservatism. In 1381 the officers of London replaced their original mayoral seal on the grounds that it was 'parvum, rude et antiquum'.⁵⁶ However, Mathew has suggested that in the later Middle Ages the idea of fashion was still a specifically élite, courtly one.⁵⁷ In contrast to the metropolis, the authorities at York may have been guided by more traditional, perhaps increasingly provincial values. Another, more positive possibility, is that the governors of York simply followed different priorities to their London peers. The pattern of distribution of Harvey and McGuinness's élite seals suggests that they were the work of London goldsmiths. However, at the time at which the second common seal was engraved, York was regarded as an important centre of goldsmithery in its own right.⁵⁸ Some of the seals of the Archbishops of York are known to have been engraved by local craftsmen.⁵⁹ The comparative lack of sophistication of the common seal may reflect not backwardness, but rather the confidence felt by the civic officers in the skills of the city's own craftsmen. Once again local or regional concerns predominate over considerations of prestige on an national or international stage.

At first sight the seals of London and York present a similar view of the nature of civic identity in the later medieval period. In both places civic identity is represented as an amalgam of local and national, religious and secular concerns. A detailed examination reveals important differences in the emphasis placed on these different elements, however.

At London, stylistic and iconographic choices show a strong interest in constructing the city in a privileged relation to the monarch. The seals also suggest that civic officers wished to

earliest and most distinguished example. Most of these seals were owned by religious institutions in the South East of England, but the civic seals of Canterbury, Dover and Winchelsea are also regarded as belonging to this series. Harvey and McGuinness, *Guide to British Medieval Seals*, p. 108.

⁵⁶ Alexander and Binski, eds., *Age of Chivalry*, p. 274.

⁵⁷ Gervase Mathew, *The Court of Richard II* (London, 1968), p. 1.

⁵⁸ Although York could not equal London, it was a respectable rival. Archaeological evidence for goldsmithing and jewellery production exists from the Viking period onwards and York goldsmiths are recorded from the mid 11th century. Between 1272 and 1399 a total of 83 were admitted to the freedom of York, and another 105 between 1399 and 1509'. Marian Campbell, 'Gold, Silver and Precious Stones', in John Blair and Nigel Ramsay, eds., *English Medieval Industries: Craftsmen, Techniques, Products* (London and Rio Grande, 1991), pp. 107-167 at p. 147.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

portray the city as uniquely fashionable and sophisticated, and perhaps even as being of importance on a European stage. At York, by contrast, though royal imagery is invoked, more local concerns are given equal weight. Here tradition is privileged above innovation, while English sigillographic norms are followed at the expense of prestigious international models.

Literary Discourse: Style and Rhetoric

i. London

The factor most likely to strike the viewer in relation to the seals of London is their extreme elaboration. The aspect of the language of the London letters which creates the greatest impression is very similar; it is the highly ornate style of the prose. This can be shown by even a comparatively small sample of the text. The following example, which is broadly representative of the whole series, forms part of the opening sentence of a letter sent to the king in 1417:

Of Alle erthely Princes Our most dred souereigne liege Lord and noblest Kyng we, youre simple Officers, Mair and Aldermen of youre trewe Citee of London, with exhibicion of alle maner subiectif reuerence and seruisable lowenesse that may be hadde in dede, or in Mynde conceyued, **recommende vs** vnto your most noble hye Magnificence and excellent Power, **bisechyng** the heuenly kyng of his noble grace and Pitee that he so would illumine and extende vpon the trone of your kyngly mageste the radyouse bemys of hys bounteuous grace, that the begunnen spede, by hys benigne suffraunce and help yn your Chiualiruse persoune fixed and afermed, mowe so be continued forth, and determined so to his plesaunce, your worship, and alle your reumys proffyt, **that we ... the sonner myght approche** and visuelly perceyue, to singuler confort and special Joye of vs alle ...⁶⁰

In this passage at least three types of stylistic elaboration can be identified. First, the overall structure of the sentence is extremely complex; the passage quoted above, which represents only part of the original syntactic unit, contains only two main verbs, qualified by greatly extended subclauses. Second, both adjectives and verbs are repeatedly presented in pairs: the addressee is both a 'dred lord' and a 'noble kyng'; the writers offer both their 'subiectif

⁶⁰Quoted from Chambers and Daunt, *Book of London English*, p. 68. (LB I, f. ccix). Most of these letters are to be found in other sources, but quotations will be given from this volume where possible, as the best available transcription.

reuerence' and 'seruisable lowenesse'; God is imagined as 'illumining' and 'extending' his 'radyous' beams and his 'bounteous' grace. This technique creates the effect of richness and verbal virtuosity. Finally, the passage shows a clear bias towards French and Latin loan words, such as 'radyouse' and 'perceyue', and away from their Norse or Anglo-Saxon equivalents, such as 'bright' or 'see'. To a modern reader this lends the text an aura of elevation, for in modern prose, vocabulary of this kind is found only in formal or learned contexts, such as sermons or academic monographs, rather than in pragmatic communications.

As we argued in chapter one, assessments of medieval texts based on modern literary or linguistic sensibilities are invariably misleading. In order to assess whether these letters stake a claim to authority comparable to that found in their seals, we must therefore investigate the precise context of their original reception. Would the style of these letters have been regarded as prestigious and learned in the second decade of the fifteenth century, or might this style already have been viewed as exaggerated, or even dated? The two scholars who have attempted to answer this question most recently have drawn diametrically opposed conclusions. For Malcolm Richardson it is the second of the two interpretations which is the more persuasive. In his view the prose of the London governors is 'insufferably obsequious, verbose and dull'. This grandiloquent style is, he implies, rather dated when compared to the 'progressive' style of the signet letters of Henry V. The king's letters:

are not of course models of letterwriting style, and many show traces of the haste with which they were composed. At that, they all share one characteristic: not a word is wasted, nor is an inflated, bombastic phrase to be found anywhere; here is the unadorned, sometimes rough, but still identifiable plain style in its early form.⁶¹

J.D. Burnley's interpretation is offered as part of a general survey of attitudes towards style in late medieval England.⁶² Vernacular authors, he notes, seldom discuss questions of style.

However, the London letters seem to him to fall into a category which is referred to in vernacular writing. In the prologue to *The Clerk's Tale* Harry Baily famously urges the next storyteller:

⁶¹Malcolm Richardson, 'Henry V, the English Chancery and Chancery English' *Speculum* 55 (1980): 726-750 at p. 731.

⁶²David Burnley, *A Guide to Chaucer's Language* (London, 1983), pp. 186-88.

Telle us som murie thyng of adventures.
 Youre termes, youre colours and youre figures,
 Keepe hem in stoor til so be ye endite
 Heigh style as whan that men to kynges write.
 Speketh so pleyn at this tyme, we yow preye,
 That we may understonde what ye seye.⁶³

Burnley understands the style of the London letters as this 'heigh style', a type of language which was used to indicate ceremoniousness and deference to the addressee throughout the later Middle Ages.

The conflict between these assessments suggests that both cannot be correct; the style of the letters cannot be both prestigious and dated. In fact, when the London letters are systematically compared to contemporary epistolary material, problems begin to emerge in the theories of both critics. The interpretation which is more obviously flawed is that advanced by Malcolm Richardson. It is certainly true that many of Henry V's letters are perfunctory compared to those of his addressees. However, not all his letters are couched in such plain terms. For example, a letter to his own father, written in 1401, opens:

Mon tresredoubté et souveraigne seignur et pere, je me recommande a vostre magestee roiale, tant humblement et tresentierement de cuer come je say ou plus puisse, treshumblement requerant vostre graciuse benisoun; en vous remerceant moult humblement et tresentierement de tout mon tresentier cuer de vooz honorablez et gracieuses letters, quelx il vous a pleu de me envoyer par J. de B., vostre vadlet, lesquelx receu ay a Cestre yce joefdy le vj. jour d'octobre de ceste present moys séant a manger, par la contenue des queux j'ay entendu de tresgrand joye de moun coer que vous, mon tresredoubté et souveraigne seignur et pere, estez en bone santee de vostre treshaute personne, la mercie nostre seignur, qui en tiel estat vous veulle longement conserver pur sa seinte grace.⁶⁴

This passage bears a close resemblance to those written by the London authorities; clearly 'plain' style does not therefore reflect the personality of the king. Neither, in fact, does it seem to represent a new fashion, associated with the transition to English. Signet letters of Richard II, which are written in Anglo-Norman, are just as curt as those of Henry V, while some English letters written by Edward IV are highly elaborate in style. The obvious explanation for the simplicity of the letters described by Richardson lies not in their date of

⁶³Chaucer, *The Clerk's Prologue*, ll. 15-20 in L. D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford, 1988), p. 137.

⁶⁴M. Dominica Legge, ed., *Anglo-Norman Letters and Petitions from All Souls MS 182*, Anglo-Norman Text Society 3 (1941), No. 249, pp. 313-14.

composition but rather in their function. According to medieval epistolary theory, the style of a letter should reflect two factors; the relative status of the epistolary partners and the subject of writing. According to a twelfth-century writer:

to exalted persons and in great causes the splendor of the words and greatness of the deed should be displayed in a manner fitting the material. To middling people, however, suitable things can be said temperately, whereas a weak person should have fewer words the lower he is and use no long sentences, provided that his brevity or that of his interlocutor generates no obscurity and is not deprived of vigor in joining words to matter.⁶⁵

The letters of Henry V appear simple not because the king was attempting to pioneer a new 'plain style'. Rather, a comparatively simple and direct mode of expression was preferred because these communications were descending in orientation and pragmatic in intent.

This extract from the treatise of Paul of Camaldoli seems to counter Richardson's theory that the style of the London letters was in some way old-fashioned. Conversely, it seems to offer strong support to Burnley's thesis that the style of the letters is determined by the identity of their addressee; in the terms of the treatise, the London missives are 'exalted' letters, which seek to reflect the splendour of the king in the elegance of their prose. However when we examine a range of letters sent to Henry V in the same period as those from London, it becomes clear that this twelfth-century text provides at best a partial guide to fifteenth-century reality. Far from displaying the 'grandiloquence' prescribed by Camaldoli, and viewed as a prerequisite by Harry Baily, many of the missives sent to the king in this period are written in a surprisingly straightforward manner. Consider, for example, the spareness of the following, sent to Henry V in 1419:

Most excellent, most hiest, myghtiest Prynce and most Soveryan Lord, all maner of low supjection afore sayd. Lykyth yt youre ryall Majeste to wete the governance and makyng of youre Shippe at Bayon. At the makyng of this Letter yt was in this estate ...⁶⁶

⁶⁵Giles Constable, 'The Structure of Medieval Society According to the *Dictatores* of the Twelfth Century', in Kenneth Pennington and Robert Somerville, eds., *Law, Church and Society: Essays in Honor of Stephan Kuttner* (Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 253-267 at p. 259. The original reads: 'Sublimibus namque personis et in magnis causis, secundum meterie congruentiam splendor verborum factorumque magnificentia exhiberi debet. Mediocribus [sic] vero personis oportuna temperate dici potuerunt. Tenuis autem persona quantomagis infima est tanto minus verbis affluit, et magnarum sententiarum lege privatus, sic tamen ut brevitatis eius vel ad illum loquentis nullam generet obscuritatem et verborum inunctura vigorem materie non deserat.' Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 266.

⁶⁶Henry Ellis, ed., *Original Letters Illustrative of English History*, series 2, 4 vols. (London, 1827):I, p. 69. Dated 1419.

Equally plain are letters written by officers at Calais during the course of campaigning. The salutation of a letter from the treasurer of Calais, written perhaps in 1422, could hardly contrast more strongly with those of the London letters:

Souveraine Lorde, yn as humble wise as any true liege man can thinke or devise, I recommend me unto your noble grace. Please yow to wite, that I have received your gracious letters write at Sainliz the xxj day of Juil[sic], charging me to certiffie yow the cause, why that I restrained the souldeours of youre toune of Calyes ...⁶⁷

Many other examples could be cited. However, the most interesting for our present purpose are letters sent by governors of towns and cities other than London in the early years of the fifteenth century. Of the three examples which survive, that which most closely resembles our model is a letter sent by Mayor and Jurats of Bordeaux in 1405. The missive opens, for example:

Treshault et tresexcellent Prince, nostre tresredoubté et tressouverain seigneur, nous toutz, voz humbles lieges et foiaux subgiz, nous recomandons tant humblement come plus poons a vostre roiale magestee et treshaute magnificence, laquelle Dieu par sa seinte grace vueille toutdis conserver, maintenir et accroistre en bien et honeur ainsi come vostre tresnoble et tresgracious cuer a en desir, et nous aussi le desirons de tout le nostre entierment, a laquelle plaise pur sa grace benignement entendre que ...⁶⁸

In this passage, as in the section from the London letter which we examined at the opening of this section, adjectives and nouns are grouped in synonymous pairs. The length of the sentence also suggests an attempt at elevation. Yet though the prose of this letter is undoubtedly complex, the overall effect is somewhat less ornate than that found in the London letters; here there are no 'radyous beams' or illumined thrones. Subclauses are fewer and less amplified. The letters of the other two towns present a still greater contrast to those of the London clerks. In many letters of this period an elaborate salutation precedes a plainly written letter; the governors of Bayonne and Paris dispense even with this preliminary ostentation. The former, sent to Henry V at an unknown date, begins simply:

Tresexcellent Prince et nostre tresredoubté et tresouverain seignur, humble recommandacion precedant. Please a vostre roial magestee savoir que ...⁶⁹

⁶⁷Cecil Monro, ed., *Letters of Margaret of Anjou*, Camden Society o.s. 86 (1863), p. 15.

⁶⁸Legge, ed., *Anglo-Norman Letters*, No. 332, p. 397.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, No. 276, p. 334.

A missive sent by the commune of Paris to Henry VI in 1432 opens in equally businesslike fashion:

Nostre souverain seigneur, nous nous recommandons a vous tant et si treshumblement comme plus povons. Et pour ce nostre souverain seigneur que nous savons certainement que en tout temps estes desirant savoir de lestat et nouvelles de ceste vostre ville capital de ce royaume et du pays d'environ, il plaise a vostre tres haulte mageste royal savoir que ...⁷⁰

The letters of the governors of Paris and Bayonne are strikingly different to those of London, that of the city of Bordeaux only slightly closer. Letters to the king from royal officers seem also, for the most part, to be much simpler and more direct than those sent by the London governors. However, a number of rather closer analogues can be found among the letters which survive from this early period. Though no one letter contains all the characteristics of the London epistles, two can be taken as representative of the kind of parallels found more widely in this epistolary material. The first example, which offers a corollary for London's lexical range and syntactic complexity, is a letter written by Henry Despenser, Bishop of Norwich to Queen Philippa of Portugal around 1399. A measure of the style is suggested by the first half of the opening sentence:

Trescellente et resredoubté, tresgracieuse et ma souveraigne dame, je me recoma[n]k a vostre treshautisme nobleie auxi humblement et obsessantement come ascun loial coer en ascun manere sciét ou plous puis puist, et combien que me faut de sen et puissance de vous mercier et rendre a tant come je duisse ou sui tenuz, par quoy je prie humblement et d'entier cuer a luy toutpuissant et en tant come je puis say ou puisse de vous rendre les innumerables bountees et bienfites queles j'ay resceu avaunt ces heures de vostre bountivouse gentillesse
⁷¹
 ...

The second, which bears some resemblance to the rhetorical style of the letters (allusions to the beams of glory and the throne of God, for example) appears to have been composed by Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester, the king's uncle, on the occasion of his victory at Agincourt. This missive, written in Latin, begins:

Most Glorious Prince and invincible Lord, the devoted chaplain, in as humble wise as he can or may, recommends himself to his supreme Lord on earth. To

⁷⁰Jules Delpit, ed., *Collection générale des documents français qui se trouvent en Angleterre* (Paris, 1847), p. 248. (LB K, f. 96).

⁷¹Legge, ed., *Anglo-Norman Letters*, No. 297, p. 360.

the omnipotent King of Kings, whose judgements are ever just, I humbly address such daily thanksgivings as I can. Now, what I long hoped for and wished to see before I left this world, I behold before my eyes, whereby I feel my heart warmed with special delight, viz., the glory and honour of the famous realm of England, for a long time wholly lulled to sleep and forgotten, roused from its heavy slumber.⁷²

This echoes sentiments such as the following, found in the conclusion of the London letter quoted at the opening of the present discussion:

we, your symple officers, specially beseche vnto alle the holy company of heuenly knyghthode, assembled in the hie blisse wher-as is eternal ioye and non euynesse, so be-shyne the noble knyghthode in your cronicable excellence aporeued, that ye mowe in this world vpon vs and alle our other lieges with report of worldly victory longe regne and endure.⁷³

What light do these letters shed on the problem of identifying the social meanings of style? What is it that determines the need for 'high style' in these examples, and how might this relate to the London letters? One hypothesis, suggested by the second example, is that the extraordinary elaboration of the London letters may be prompted by their subject matter.⁷⁴

Burnley's analysis focussed merely on the identity of the addressee; however, that of the *dictator*, quoted above, associates exalted style not simply with the splendour of the recipient but also with 'greatness of matter' and of 'deed'. The contrast between the letters of the London governors and those of other royal servants may therefore be explained by a difference in function; where the former are responding to news of military victories, the latter communicate practical logistical information. Though almost certainly a factor of some importance, the topic or subject matter of the London letters cannot, however, be the only

⁷²Monro, ed., *Letters of Margaret of Anjou*, p. 2. The original reads 'Gloriosissime princeps et invictissime domine, ipsam quam sit aut possit capellanus devotus domino suo in terris suppremo reomendacionem humilimam. Omnipotent' regi regum, cuius iudicia semper justa sunt, ipsas quas valeo cotidianas gratiarum actiones supplex exsolvo. Dum iam, quod diu sperabam, quod optaveram et antequam ab hac luce migrarem videre rogaveram, oculos ante meos conspicio (unde meum ex intimis animum speciali gaudio refocillo) inclitissimi videlicet regni Anglie gloriam et honorem, a diu soportam, etiam prope e memoria elapsam, sompno de gravissimo suscitatum'. In the original no indication is given as to the identity of the author. This is inferred by Monro from the similarity of the letter to a speech delivered by Beaufort to parliament on the same occasion.

⁷³Chambers and Daunt, eds., *A Book of London English*, pp. 69-70.

⁷⁴A further example which prompts the same conclusion is the following, sent by Sir Hugh Luttrell, lieutenant of Harfleur, to Henry V in 1419: 'I have undurstonde that the Creatour of all thyng, of hise heygh pourveance, hath used zow in herte to bryng zow unto the conclusion of perpetual pes betux the two Remes that ever owte of mende of ony Cronicles han ben in discention, schewyng zow fortune to conclude and bring at an ende that noo man kynde myght hyr bifore have i wrought ...' Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 2:I, No. XXVII, pp. 84-85.

determinant of 'high style'; Henry Despenser's letter to Queen Philippa does not discuss the 'noble' topic of war. The majority of letters which resemble this example, in their use of ornate and extended salutations and *exordia*, were written in peacetime and do not discuss topics of particular philosophical or religious elevation.⁷⁵ How, then, can the resemblance of these examples to the London epistles be accounted for?

In fact, the solution to this problem may lie less with the theory of the *dictatores*, and more with what we know of typical linguistic interaction. Medieval theorists place great emphasis on the identity of the addressee as the determinant of salutation and style. However, in ordinary conversational use speakers also use language to express their *own* identity by selecting between different available norms. In the words of the sociolinguist William Downes, how a speaker expresses himself 'conveys social meanings about him and his relationship to the hearer and to the larger social structure'.⁷⁶ Viewed from this perspective, it seems likely that the resemblance of the London missives to the episcopal letters reflects the desire of the city governors to construct a social identity for themselves which is similar to that of the ecclesiastics. What aspect of the bishops' persona might the city be seeking to emulate? One possibility is that the Londoners are attempting to construct an authoritative identity based on erudition. The complex style of the London letters may be a form of conspicuous display, an ostentatious vaunting of learning which seeks to establish an elite identity for the city. However, in addition to their prestige as eminent clerics, Henry Despenser and Henry Beaufort both drew status from their position as nobles with close connections to the crown. The second possibility is, therefore, that it is the social status of the bishops which is the object of interest.

If we move away from style and focus more closely on the rhetoric of this series of letters, it seems likely that it is the second quality, the nobility of the writers, which the London governors were seeking to emulate. As we have already noted, identifying the contours of social discourses used in the past is a difficult, at times almost an impossible task.

⁷⁵None are quite as elaborate in style. However, compare Legge, ed., *Anglo-Norman Letters*, Nos. 15, 29, 48, 64.,171. See also Edoard Perroy, ed., *The Diplomatic Correspondence of Richard II*, Camden 3rd series 48 (1933), Nos. 55 and 66.

⁷⁶William Downes, *Language and Society* (London, 1984), p. 229.

However, one group of conventions does seem consistently associated with nobility, both by medieval poets and by modern critics; those which can broadly be bracketed under the heading 'courtly love'. Stephen Jaeger argues of the High Middle Ages that 'aristocracy appealed to sentiment as one of the groundings of superiority ...[n]onerotic love ennobled and gave witness to nobility'.⁷⁷ Both in *The Canterbury Tales* and in *The Parliament of Fowls* much of the humour depends on the perception that elegant talk of love is the preserve of the aristocrat. For example, the 'gentil tercelet' admonishes the goose 'Thy kynde is of so low a wrechednesse/That what love is, thow canst nouthen seen ne gesse'.⁷⁸

In relation to the whole later medieval period, Larry Benson has suggested that to speak of love was 'to use a class dialect, the first of which we have any clear indication in English'.⁷⁹ Characteristics of this discourse are rarely found in letters; their natural milieu is the love lyric. It seems to me, however, that many of the peculiarities of the London epistles, when compared to contemporary missives, are accounted for by an attempt to incorporate some of these prestigious poetic conventions into epistolary writing.

Allusions to 'courtly love' conventions could be identified in many aspects of these letters. For the purposes of the present discussion we shall concentrate on two groups of features: 'hyperbole' and 'sensibility', or 'suffering'. The first feature is seen most clearly in the letters in the way in which the London governors position themselves in relation to their addressee. In general commentaries on medieval letters, it is sometimes suggested that terms of address were laughably grandiose and extreme; Erasmus, satirising the teaching of the *dictatores*, suggests the following, as an example of the type of salutation which should be avoided by enlightened humanist writers:

To the most perspicacious lord, golden candlestick of the seven liberal arts, shining peak of theologians, ever gleaming lantern of religion ...⁸⁰

⁷⁷Stephen C. Jaeger, *Ennobling love: in search of lost sensibility* (Philadelphia, 1999), p. 37.

⁷⁸Chaucer, *Parliament of Fowls*, ll. 601-2 in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 393.

⁷⁹L.D. Benson, 'Courtly Love and Chivalry in the Later Middle Ages', in R.F. Yeager, ed., *Fifteenth-Century Studies: Recent Essays* (Hamden, 1984), pp. 237-57 at p. 242-44.

⁸⁰Desiderius Erasmus, *De conscribendis epistolis*, ed. and trans. Charles Fantazzi, in J. K. Sowards, ed., *Collected Works of Erasmus Vol. 25: Literary and Educational Writings 3* (Toronto, 1985), pp. 1-254, at p. 53.

In fact, as we have seen, most letters directed to the king in the early years of the fifteenth century begin quite simply; the author of the Nostell Priory treatise, writing somewhat later, also prescribes comparatively plain formulae such as 'Ryght hight[sic] & right redowbtid lord' and 'Right excellent & my myghtie lord'.⁸¹ The London salutation 'Of Alle erthely Princes Our most dred souereigne liege Lord and noblest Kyng' is therefore distinctly peculiar in an epistolary context. So too are other references to the king seen in the body of some missives, such as the cancelled allusion to 'your most excellent and noble persone, more worthi to vs than alle worldly richesse or plente' found in a letter of 1418.⁸² In love lyrics, on the other hand, many parallels can be found for such elaborately deferential exclamations. In one late fifteenth-century lyric, for example, the beloved is apostrophised 'Ye be princesse gracious of all nobilnesse/ Ye surmount all creaturs in worthiness'. Others describe the object of their admiration as 'Benygne flour, coroune of vertues alle', 'perfyte whomanhede/ Ensampull of worchyp' and 'Ffair freshest erply creature that euer the sonne ouer-shone'.⁸³

A similar measure of courtly exaggeration can be seen in the way in which the governors present themselves to their royal addressee. Contemporary letter-writers recommend themselves 'with humble heart' or 'as humbly as any true liege man can thinke or devise'.⁸⁴

The Londoners, by contrast, push their protestations of deference to extremes. In 1424, for example, they present themselves to the Duke of Bedford:

in as humble maner as eny ordyr of writing can expresse, for bountees & bienfaites innumerable, which þe liberal grace of your high and gracious lordship, without our meryt or desert, hathe euer shewed vs hereftofore ...⁸⁵

In a letter to the same addressee written in the same year they thank the Duke for his goodwill which:

⁸¹Leeds, West Yorkshire Archive Service, NP C1/1/1, f. 142.

⁸²Chambers and Daunt, eds., *A Book of London English*, pp. 74-75. (LB I, f. ccxvi).

⁸³Carpenter, ed., *Armburgh Papers*, p. 159; Chaucer, *The Complaint Unto Pity*, l. 58 in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 641; Rossell Hope Robbins, *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (Oxford, 1955), No. 198, p. 20 and No. 199, p. 202.

⁸⁴Monro, ed., *Letters of Margaret of Anjou*, pp. 13 and 15.

⁸⁵Chambers and Daunt, eds., *A Book of London English*, p. 88 (LB K, f. 21).

excedeth in-estimablich our power and konnyng to yeue you thankynge perof recompensable in eny wise. Bot god, þat is guerdoner of euery gode ded, quite rewarde yowe in stede of vs, where we may not.⁸⁶

These elaborately expressed sentiments clearly form part of a discourse of service; however, they also seem to draw on at least two tropes associated with 'courtly love'. The first is the unworthiness of the lover. In *Troilus and Criseyde* the narrator gently mocks the conventional nature of the hero's letter to his lady. After praising Criseyde in extravagant terms, he presents himself with great humility:

And after that he seyde - and leigh ful loude -
Hymself was litel worth, and lasse he koude;

And that she sholde han his konnyng excused,
That litel was, and ek he dredde hire soo;
And his unworthynesse he ay acused.⁸⁷

The second is what may perhaps be called the 'trope of ineffability'. In the *Book of the Duchess*, for example, the Duke presents his lady's face as indescribable in its beauty 'Me lakketh both Englyssh and wit/For to undo hyt at the fulle'.⁸⁸ The narrator of a love lyric, written in the same century as the London letters, is equally at a loss to express his pain:

For lak of speche I can now say no more
To expresse my mater as I wolde I may not playnly
My wytte is dulle to telle half my sore.⁸⁹

This second example brings us neatly to the other category in which 'courtliness' seems to be apparent in these letters. One of the most powerful images in the medieval discourse of 'fin amor' is that depicted above; the lover, exiled from the sight of his beloved, who undergoes great torment or 'sore'. A neat example of this trope, addressed in this case to a lord rather than to a lady, is found in a series of verses composed by John Paston III in 1471:

My lyfe, alas, it seruyth of no thyng,
Sythe wyth your pertyng depertyd my plesyer.
Wyshyng youyr presence setyth me on fyer,

⁸⁶Ibid, p. 87. (LB K, f. 18v.)

⁸⁷Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book 2, ll. 1077-80 in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 504.

⁸⁸Chaucer, *Book of the Duchess*, ll. 898-99 in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 341.

⁸⁹Christine Carpenter, ed., *The Armbrugh Papers* (Woodbridge, 1998), p. 158.

But then your absence dothe my hert so cold
That for the peyne I not me wher to hold.⁹⁰

In the London letters, the desire of the city governors for news of the king's welfare is expressed in intensely emotional terms, which closely recall the conventions of 'love-talking'. When the officers receive tidings of the king they are 'inwardly confortd and reioysed'.⁹¹

On other occasions the mayor and aldermen describe their 'feruent desire' for news; they represent themselves as 'thirsting' after information which 'refreshes' them like 'an hevenly drink and infusion'.⁹² If they can hear nothing of the king's welfare 'we, in defaute of such visitacion, languisse not as men from so hie a grace sequestered and exiled'.⁹³ The implication of this imagery seems clear; for the officers at London, as for courtly lovers, contact with the addressee is not incidental, but is crucial to their welfare. Indeed, in the metaphor of thirst and drinking, it seems to figure as a precondition of life itself.

As in their seals, so too in the prose style and rhetoric of their letters, the aim of the governors of London seems to be to construct an élite identity. In the seals this strategy takes two forms. The first is an emphasis on uniqueness, reflected in allusions to the Heavenly Jerusalem and to the Imperial cities of Cologne and Mainz. The second is an insistent concentration on the person and iconography of the king. In the style and rhetoric of the letters a similar binary can be seen. As we have shown, the letters seem to represent the governors as erudite, even noble in bearing. This development closely parallels the formulation of the idea of mayoral lordship which we explored in chapter three above. However, the use of the tropes of 'courtly love' seems to make a second, more precise statement of identity. The terms of this discourse dictate that the suitor, in this case the city governors, acknowledges himself to be only one of the beloved's admirers. Yet the competitive frame of this language determines another feature; aware of the presence of rivals, the lover represents himself as the most ardent, and most devoted, and most constant

⁹⁰*PL*:I, No. 351, pp. 571-3 at p. 572.

⁹¹Chambers and Daunt, ed., *Book of London English*, p. 85. (LB I, f. cclxiii).

⁹²*Ibid.*, pp. 79 (f. ccxxxvi); The drink metaphor is found at pp. 69, 79, 87 (LB I, ff. ccix and ccxxxvi; LB K, f. 18v).

⁹³*Ibid.*, p. 69 (LB I, f. ccix). The word languish is particularly associated with the suffering of lovers. Cf. *MED*, languishen (v.)

of all imaginable suitors. The claim implicit in the adoption of this 'courtly' discourse is not therefore simply that to aristocratic status; it is also that to an exclusively intimate relationship with the person of the king.

ii. York

As we noted in the introduction to the present chapter, the first English letters to survive at York were composed significantly later than those found at London; where the earliest London letter dates from 1417, no missives are found in the York archive until 1476. The difference in date poses certain problems; particular attention must be paid to the context of the later letters before accurate comparisons can be made. In one area, however, a direct parallel emerges between the letters of the two cities; this appears to transcend differences in date. In the York registers of the late fifteenth century we find several instances in which the city is described as 'the king's chamber'. For example, in a letter to the king's council around 1477, the city complains that a fishgarth in the river Ayre was 'to the greit common anoisauce and intollerable hurt of the kynges chaimbre of the cite of Yorke'.⁹⁴ Ten years later, the city pleads with Henry VII that a murderer might be convicted, contrary to the intentions of those 'entending the subversion of us and this your chambre'.⁹⁵ In 1489 the officers note that they have denied entry of the city to Lord Clifford, because a letter had been received from the king 'shewing and comaunding in the same that this his chaumbre surelie to be kept to the behufe of his <most> roiall person'.⁹⁶ Though this expression is not used in the letters sent by the Londoners to Henry V it seems also to have formed an important part of the rhetoric of the capital city. During Henry VI's entry to the city in 1432 the mayor is said to have greeted the king as follows:

Soveraigne lord as wel come be ye to your noble roialme of Englund and in especial unto your notable cite London other wise called your chambre as en (ever) was cristen prince to place or people ...⁹⁷

⁹⁴HB:I, p. 116. (1, f. 65v).

⁹⁵HB:II, p. 565 (6, f. 93v-94).

⁹⁶HB:II, p. 650 (6, f. 152).

⁹⁷Delpit, ed., *Collection Générale*, pp. 244-48 at p. 245. Later in the same account the Mayor and Aldermen are represented as addressing the king in the following words 'Most cristen prince the good folks of youre notable cite of London, otherwise cleped your chambre, besechen in her most lowely wyse, that they mowe be recomaunded unto your hynesse'. (LB K, ff. 103b-104b).

In 1443 a petition was submitted to the same king arguing:

diverse persounes nat welle enfourmede objecte by motives disclosed unto youre Chambre and Citee of London shoulde be prejudiciall unto the good publique of your Shire of Surre...⁹⁸

In 1456 the same expression is used by the king in a letter to the city. Henry VI writes:

considered that our saide citee is called and named oure chambre and so we holde it wherein shuld be rest and peas and the whiche ought to be of goode governaunce to ensauple of all this Reaume that from hensforthward ye ne suffre any persone or persones of what estate degree or condicioun that he or they be of at any time to entre into oure saide citee or chambre ...⁹⁹

The chronology of development suggests that the appearance of the expression at York represents a deliberate borrowing from London. But, if this is true, to what end were York authorities appropriating the language of the metropolis? What was the significance of the idea of 'the king's chamber'? In Middle English, the dominant meaning of the word 'chamber' appears to be the *private* room or apartments of a house.¹⁰⁰ In the royal context a still more precise meaning can be ascribed to the term. Myers suggests that the king's chamber, which evolved early in the history of English kingship, was the place to which the king could 'withdraw from the noise and publicity of the hall'.¹⁰¹ Discussing the later medieval period, Given-Wilson describes the king's chamber as 'the inner, private sanctum of the *domus* where he dressed, bathed, slept, and often dined or worked away from the hubbub of the household, closeted in privacy with a small inner circle of friends and counsellors'.¹⁰² To describe a city as 'the king's chamber' is to position it as a place enjoying a particular, privileged relationship with the crown.¹⁰³ Further, the metaphor

⁹⁸Reginald R. Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London: Letter-Book K* (London, 1911), p. 298. (LB K, f. 220)

⁹⁹Reginald R. Sharpe, ed., *London and the Kingdom*, 3 vols. (London, 1894-95):III, pp. 376-77. (LB K, f. 287). The same phrase is used by the city governors in the reply to a letter of the same year. *Ibid.*, pp. 380-82 (LB K, f. 292).

¹⁰⁰*MED*, chaumbre (n).

¹⁰¹A. R. Myers, *The household of Edward IV* (Manchester, 1959), p. 14.

¹⁰²Christopher Given-Wilson, *The royal household and the king's affinity: service, politics and finance in England, 1360-1413* (Yale, 1989), p. 54.

¹⁰³This interpretation is strengthened by the use of the image in *Concordia*, a poem written by the Carmelite friar Richard Maidstone to commemorate the reconciliation between London and Richard II in 1392. Here the

seems to transform the governors of these cities from the ordinary royal servants which their constitutional status made them, into the kind of aristocratic confidants who surrounded the king in his inner sanctum, the chamber. Above we saw that York followed London in adopting the language of mayoral lordship. In the rhetoric of its letters too, the northern capital seems anxious to imitate the claim to privilege so prominent in the rhetoric of its southern competitor.

A second area in which York's pretension to rivalry with London can be seen is that of style. The missives written by the governors of the northern city are not quite as elaborate as those which the mayor and aldermen of London addressed to the king at the beginning of the century; the sentences are less syntactically complex, and the qualification of nouns and verbs is less dense. However, when contrasted with letters which the city sent to other addressees in the same period, the pretension of the letters to the sovereign becomes clear. In 1488, for example, the mayor wrote to Sir Robert Plumpton, a local gentleman. Here some lexical doublets can be seen, and techniques of coherence are also more prominent than they would be in the prose of a modern letter:

Sir as touching the same William, in the beginyng of the *troble* and *variance* betwyxt the servants of his & John Persons, his bretheren, and other, he was innocent, as fare as I, my bretheren aldermen and other the common counsell of the Cytte of York, by any *ways* and *meanes* can vnderstand. And the same Wylliam hath shewed vnto vs, þat he at no tyme haue given cause to the sayd Person so to deale with his servants, as they tofore haue donn.¹⁰⁴

However, in letters to the king both features are considerably more prominent, and the prose is also more syntactically complex. Just one sentence from a letter of 1476 reads, for example:

For the whiche, under your moste gracious protection, we according with *our othes* and *his demeretes* by all our *hole* and *commen* assent, have *discharged* and *avoided* hym from our saide *service* and *office*, moste humbly besecheing your highnes to stonde unto us *goode* and *gracious* <sovereine>lorde and of your habundant grace tenderly to have in youre most noble consideracion the premissez with the *unitie* and *commen wele* of your saide citie, and under your

chamber is viewed as a place of marital privacy. The king is urged 'Let not the bridegroom hate the bridal chamber he has always loved'. Discussed by Christian Liddy, 'King's Chamber, Queen's Chamber, Prince's Chamber: Expressing a relationship between urban communities and the crown in later medieval England' Unpublished paper delivered at Leeds IMC, 1998.

¹⁰⁴ Joan Kirby, ed., *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, Camden Society 5th series 8 (1996), No. 65, p. 78-79.

moste gracious permission to licence us to *accepte* and *admitte* our commen seriant and clerke unto our saide office accordeing with our *liberties* and *grauntes...*¹⁰⁵

Here the features of curial prose style - the techniques of coherence and the amplification - are extremely prominent.

The difference between these three letters shows that the governors varied their style according to the status of their addressees. However, it does not address the question at the heart of our enquiry, that is, what the letters reveal about the type of image *of themselves* which the writers hoped to project. To assess this we must develop a sense of how York's prose compares to that produced elsewhere in the later fifteenth century, a period which, as we have seen, was somewhat different to that in which the London letters were written.¹⁰⁶ The volume of letters surviving from this period makes it impracticable to present a detailed survey of the evidence here. Two general observations can nevertheless be made, both of which shed important light on the York letters. First, though many individuals in the second half of the century do write to socially elevated addressees in a 'curial' style, similar to that seen in York's letters to the king, not all writers appear to have enjoyed the competence or expertise to produce such elaborate, syntactically complex prose. We have already observed that petitions submitted by the guildsmen of York and Coventry usually show little familiarity with the code which we have labelled 'curial prose'. More suggestive still is the lack of elaboration in the letters written by the governors of the latter city. With the exception of references to the king, a missive sent to Lord Rivers by the civic governors of Coventry in 1481 shows few features of this style:

And, oure good lorde, hit is so that what of oure neyghbours of þis Cite hauyng þe honorable clothyng of our seid noble lorde, the prince, commaunded to prepare hem furth, and other reteyned with lordez and other Gentils, a gret nombre of people entend to departe oute of þis Cite, and as-to reteign of oure seid soueraign lorde eny persones hider resortyng, & to vs vnknowen, they beyng not sufficiently harnesssed, we therin dought þe pleasure of oure saide soueraign lorde.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ *HB*:I, p. 47.

¹⁰⁶ See Chapter 1, Appendix.

¹⁰⁷ Mary Dormer Harris, ed., *The Coventry Leet Book or Mayor's Register*, 4 vols., EETS o.s. 134-35, 138, 146 (1907-13):II, p. 487. [Hereafter *CLB*.]

The second contextual observation which may be offered is that curial prose is particularly closely associated with two contexts. The first of these, explored in some detail by Burnley in his seminal article on the style, is that of royal bureaucracy. The first prose which conforms to this type is that produced by scribes of the king in the fourteenth century. By the fifteenth century all the petitions and memoranda copied into the Parliament Rolls are couched in these terms.¹⁰⁸ The second context which is particularly associated with this or a comparable style is social rather than institutional. The majority of letters sent by the greater aristocracy in this period are written in what could broadly be termed 'curial' prose. This is true even when the individual to whom the letter is directed is of comparatively mean social standing. In 1431, for example, Alys Lady Sudely wrote to Thomas Stonor, a mere gentleman:

where as y of singler trust in you have before enfeffed *you* with *other* in my *maners, londes and tenements* withyn dyvers shires, *wole* and hertely *prey* you, for gret *consideracions* and *causes* touching my *worship* and gret *profyt*, that ye seale the deedes, made in *your name* and other...¹⁰⁹

In 1492 George Talbot, earl of Shrewsbury, admonished Sir Robert Plumpton in terms considerably more elaborate than those in which the governors of York had seen fit to address him ten years earlier:

Wherefore, if it bee soe, I greatly marvell, *willenge* and *desyreing* you, therefore, pat vnto such tyme as this matter may be had in *good* and *perfitt* examination, [yee] will in noe wise further *intromete* or *deale* with the land, but suffer the seid Dame Joyce and her assignes peaceably to occupy the same.¹¹⁰

Though York may not have been striving for a uniquely elaborate style, as London appears to have done, it does seem to be drawing on a restricted code. By using a style which was associated with writers of wealth and education, the city fathers seem to be positioning themselves as members of a social élite, if not specifically of the nobility.

The same project, to identify the city with élite, if not with strictly aristocratic discourses, can also be seen at other linguistic levels. It is widely recognised that one of the clearest

¹⁰⁸J. D. Burnley, 'Curial Prose in England', *Speculum* 61 (1963): 593-614, at pp. 594-95. See also the documents in *ACE*.

¹⁰⁹*SL*, No. 53, p. 47

¹¹⁰Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 108, pp. 107-08.

symbols of social accomplishment in the fourteenth century was the ability to speak French, while knowledge of Latin in the same period signalled erudition of a kind which was open only to a restricted group. With the demise of French as a social language in the fifteenth century, the distinctions of prestige or register which had previously been effected by language switching seem to have become increasingly encoded in the vernacular. This process can be seen in the letters written by kings over the course of the century. At the beginning of the century, the king's prose made heavy use of 'simple' words of Anglo Saxon derivation - 'wote', 'nede', 'wonne', 'tithinges'. This can clearly be seen in an extract from one of Henry V's letters to London, written in 1419:

For we truste fully to goddes might and his mercy, wip good help of you and of our land, to haue a good ende of our sayd werre in short tyme, and for to come home vnto you to gret comfort and singuler Joye of our hert, as god knowep which he graunte vs to his *plesaunce*.¹¹¹

By the closing decades, however, royal style had shifted to emphasise French and Latin loan words, which appear now to characterise a more prestigious register. Thus some sixty years after Henry's missive, Richard III wrote to the city of York:

we hertely pray you to come unto us to London in all the *diligence* ye can possible .. thair to *eide* and *assiste* us ayanst the quene, hir blode *adherenttes* and *affinitie*, which have (endendi) *entended* and daly doith *intend* to murder and utterly distroy us .. and also the finall *distruccion* and *disheryson* of you and all odir *thenheritourz* and men of haner...¹¹²

A similar emphasis on terms of French and Latin derivation also seems to appear in the letters of the aristocracy of the later fifteenth century.¹¹³

As Burnley has rightly suggested, and as we have already discussed, it is always difficult to identify the precise connotations of any lexical item used in an historical text.¹¹⁴ This is particularly difficult in relation to the use of French and Latin loan words in English, for terms borrowed into the language at different periods would have struck the ear of

¹¹¹Chambers and Daunt, eds., *A Book of London English*, No. XXI, p. 82-83 at p. 83.

¹¹²*HB:II*, p. 713-14.

¹¹³It would require a systematic study to prove this point conclusively. But see for example *PL:II*, Nos. 504, 515, 524, 835.

¹¹⁴Burnley, *A Guide to Chaucer's Language*, pp. 134-37.

contemporaries with very different force.¹¹⁵ However, through careful contextualisation, words which were considered 'correct' or prestigious can, tentatively, be distinguished from 'lower' or more 'colloquial' vocabulary. In York's letters there are several clear instances in which certain words seem to be selected over alternatives, in order to lend the writers an air of authority or accomplishment. The term 'reedified', twice used by the city in relation to its walls, was, for example, a comparatively new word in English; it would almost certainly have struck contemporaries as more prestigious than the alternative 'bilden', which had been part of English vocabulary since the thirteenth century.¹¹⁶ In 1476 the city complained to the king that their common clerk was guilty of 'excessive takynges of money and misguideing of our bookes'. Both 'excessive' and 'misguiding' were comparatively new lexical items in English in the period in which this letter was written: in the sense in which the city uses the adjective, 'excessif' is first attested in 1425, while 'misguideing' is rare nominal form of a verb which also first appears in the fifteenth century.¹¹⁷ It seems likely that these items would therefore have struck the reader as sophisticated, creating an impression of the authors as fashionable and accomplished.

More interesting still are the terms which the city used to describe the provision of weaponry in the city: 'furnessed' and 'garnysshed'.¹¹⁸ Beyond the cachet of their French derivation, the absence of these words from an entry in the Coventry Leet Book, which is exclusively concerned with the provision of military supplies, suggests that these terms did not form part of the vocabulary of all civic governors.¹¹⁹ These words do however, appear quite regularly in Arthurian texts written around this date. For example, Malory describes how the troops of King Arthur and Sir Lancelot were 'well furnysshed and garnisyed of

¹¹⁵Ibid., 'Chapter 6: Chaucer's Vocabulary'. See also N. F. Blake, *The English Language in Medieval Literature* (London, 1977), Chapter 4.

¹¹⁶*HB:II*, pp. 549 and 561 (6, ff. 83 and 90v); *MED*, edifiien (v); bilden (v).

¹¹⁷*HB:I*, pp. 46-47 (1, f. 23v-24v); *MED*, excessif (adj.); misguiden (v), misguiding (ger). The earliest example of the latter in the *MED* is dated 'ante1500' with a composition date 'ante 1475'. It was evidently a rather unusual word, for only three examples are given in total, two of which are drawn from the same manuscript.

¹¹⁸*HB:II*, pp. 549, 562 (6, ff. 83, 90v)

¹¹⁹*CLB:I*, pp. 244-45.

all maner of thyng that longed unto the warre.¹²⁰ The anonymous author of the *Morte Arthur* describes a similar scene:

Thare the grete ware gederyde wyth galyarde knyghtes,
Garneschit on the grene felde and graythelyche arayede.¹²¹

This suggests that beyond their technical functions, these words may have borne chivalric connotations at the time the letters were written. By demonstrating their familiarity with such items of vocabulary, the governors of York may have been demonstrating more than erudition or technical competence in the matter of defence. They may even have been seeking to establish their membership of the social elite, whose identity at this period was still very much moulded by the martial ethos and its accomplishments.¹²²

In their use of style and their selection of vocabulary, the governors of York resemble those at London, at least in broad terms. In two other areas, however, clearer differences can be seen between the two cities. The first of these relates to the archiving of letter-texts. At London, the way in which the letters are preserved suggests that, unless tradition dictated otherwise, the authorities always preferred a direct and unmediated approach to the king.¹²³

The impression of London's confidence in the King's special favour is also underlined by a number of letters carefully copied into the registers. In 1471, for example, the city authorities offered to act as 'meane to the kynges highnesse' on behalf of the rebel Thomas Fauconberg, 'trustyng that by our praier he shal be unto you the rather goode and graciouse lord'.¹²⁴ In 1435 the authorities at Calais wrote to London asking them 'to be mene and movers toward the kyng our souveraigne lord and the mercious lordes of is connseill for the

¹²⁰Eugene Vinaver, ed., *Malory: Works* (one-volume text of second edition, Oxford, 1971), Bk. XX, p. 687.

¹²¹E. Björkman, ed., *Morte Arthure: mit Einleitung, Anmerkungen und Glossar* (Heidelberg, 1915), ll. 721-22. For further examples see *MED*, garnishen (v) and furnishen (v).

¹²²A useful discussion of the importance of reading courtly literature and knowing the vocabulary of gentle pursuits such as hunting to aristocratic identity is found in David Burnley, 'Lexis and Semantics', in Norman Blake, ed., *The Cambridge History of the English Language. Volume II: 1066-1476* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 409-499, at pp. 456-58.

¹²³One such tradition was that whereby the city authorities petitioned for the right to wait on the king at his coronation. Requests of this kind were directed to the Steward of England, organiser of the ceremony. Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Letter-Book K*, p. 101 (LB K, f. 70.) For the city's petition concerning the coronation of Edward IV see LB L f. 4. No fifteenth-century letters survive in the register to show the Londoners using intermediaries in their transactions with the king. (Check).

¹²⁴Sharpe, *London and the Kingdom*: III, p. 391

relevyng and sustentation of this said town'.¹²⁵ At York the situation, as represented by the surviving documentation, is quite different. 'Unaccompanied' letters to the king do appear in the city's registers. In this respect the city was conspicuously more assertive than Coventry, which never appears to have addressed the sovereign directly, always preferring to mediate transactions through the prince.¹²⁶ However, in the York House Books cases in which a direct approach is made to the king are heavily outnumbered by the those in which the city seeks, and is seen to seek support from other sources. In 1485, for example, the city officers wrote to the Archbishop of York, asking that he explain the dismissal of the city's recorder to the king:

Pleasit therfor your good lordship in whome we put our singuler comford above all creatours liffing, resorting unto you as for our socour and aide at all tymes of nede to shew the premiszez unto the kinges grace for our acquitall¹²⁷

In 1477 Richard, duke of Gloucester wrote in acknowledgment of a similar request:

we grete you wele and asserten you that accordyng to your desires late by your servaunt to us broght touching reformacion of Goldalegarth or eny other, we have moved the kynges grace in the same...¹²⁸

In London the idea of a special relationship with the king, implicit in the imagery of the chamber, is supported by the distribution of letters in civic registers.¹²⁹ At York the impression is rather different.

Clearly, the final quarter of the fifteenth century was not the most auspicious moment in the history of relations between the king and his northern capital; the image of dependence on patronage conveyed in York registers must partly reflect these particular circumstances.¹³⁰

¹²⁵Delpit, ed., *Collection Générale*, pp. 252-53 at p. 252.

¹²⁶See for example *CLB*: II, 432-5, 493-5.

¹²⁷*HB*:I, p. 378.

¹²⁸*HB*:I, p. 130.

¹²⁹The city turned to these figures on many occasions. At other times also they also invoked the help of other local dignitaries, such as Guy Fairfax and the Earls of Northumberland. See *HB*:I, p. 388: 'through the noble mediacions and instant labours and prayers shewed unto his said highnesse by the most reverend ffader in God tharchbisshop of York and and [sic] the right prepotent and noble therle of Northumberland, affermyng junctly the contentes of the said bille to be true; the said kinges most noble grace shewed hyme self to be full graciously disposed in the same'. See also *inter alia* *HB*:I, p. 116 and *HB*:II, pp. 651-52.

¹³⁰Lorraine C. Attreed, 'The King's Interest: York's Fee Farm and the Central Government, 1482-92', *Northern*

However, the fifteenth century was not one of untrammelled harmony between the king and his capital city either; this was, after all, a period which witnessed two depositions, both of which posed severe difficulties for servants of the crown.¹³¹ The difference is in the impression created by the registers of the two cities. London officers appear only to have registered those letters which supported their self-image, as trusted intimates of the crown; letters in which the city is rebuked or which reflect the confused loyalties of the governors are conspicuous by their absence.¹³² York, by contrast, carefully documented the city's dependence on the sponsorship of local lordship in its registers. Perhaps York officers were simply less sophisticated or self-conscious in their manipulation of records than their London contemporaries.¹³³ There is another possibility however. Just as, in their choice of seals, the governors chose to support city craftsman, so too in their conservation of letters, they may have wished to emphasise local affiliations alongside the special relationship to the crown.

A second, and perhaps more important, way in which the authorities at York fail to develop the implication of the ideas of mayoral lordship, and of the city as the king's chamber, is in their choice of language, or more precisely, rhetoric. We have already seen that London matched their claim to 'lordship' with the use of language marked in the period as prestigious and even aristocratic. The gentry of Yorkshire appear to have understood the authority of York officers in similarly private, 'feudal' terms. For example, Sir John

History 17 (1981): 24-43.

¹³¹ Caroline Barron, 'London and the Crown 1451-61', in J. R. L. Highfield and R. Jeffs, eds., *The Crown and Local Communities in England and France in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester, 1981), pp. 88-109; J. L. Bolton, 'The City and the Crown, 1456-1461', *The London Journal* 12 (1986): 11-24.

¹³² Letters from Margaret of Anjou which we know to have been directed to the city governors, rebuking the city for infringement of her rights, and appealing to them for their support against the Duke of York, do not appear in the Letter-Books. A letter from Prince Edward, asking for the governor's loyalty in 1461, is another striking omission. Monro, ed., *Letters of Queen Margaret*, No. LXVII, p. 98-99. Margaret Lucille Kekewich et al, eds., *The Politics of Fifteenth-Century England: John Vale's Book* (Stroud, 1995), pp. 142-43 and 147.

¹³³ This view could be supported by a consideration of the general appearance of the registers of the two cities. Deborah O'Brien argues that by the fifteenth century the London registers were carefully compiled: 'we can deduce that the civic register was functioning as more than a repository of documentary information, and that the administration intended at least certain folios of its compilation to be viewed as well as read, and to impress as well as inform'. York's registers, by contrast, are less sophisticated in their material appearance and seem to have been compiled with less care. Deborah O'Brien "'The veray registre of all trouthe": the content, function and character of civic registers of London and York, c. 1274-c.1482', unpublished DPhil. Thesis, University of York 1999, p. 171.

Conyers and Sir Robert Harrington both wrote to the city in 1486 to request that favour be shown to their kinsmen, for their own sake, and in return for the future reward of the officers *as individuals*. In the words of Harrington:

I pray you to be his good maisters according to right, *and who so ever it be that soo doith I shall put me in devour to remembre hym in my power*, with Godes grace¹³⁴

According to Conyers:

if ther be thing that I may doo *for your pleaser* I shalbe more glad for his sake to accomplish the same by Godes grace¹³⁵

These are precisely the terms in which requests would be made of fellow gentlemen or members of the nobility in this period. Thus in 1497 Richard Empson wrote to Sir William Gascoigne asking him to persuade his friend Robert Plumpton to show favour to a certain 'pore man', concluding:

and pat I may know the sayd Sir Robart is disposition by you herin; whereby ye shall bynd me to do your pleasure, if it be in me.¹³⁶

Officers at York, however, seem consistently to refuse opportunities to represent their own authority in the private, individualistic terms, characteristic of lordship. For example, in both 1485 and 1486, the mayor and aldermen wrote to the Archbishop of York, thanking him for the good lordship shown *collectively* 'unto us *and this your poore citie*'.¹³⁷ In a letter to the Earl of Northumberland, of 1486, the civic officers entreat him 'to be unto us *and the same citie* as ye have bee at all tymes herbifor especiall and singuler good lord in this behalve'.¹³⁸ The substitution of a public, collective vocabulary, for one of personal patronage and private interest, is perhaps most clearly seen in the final clause of a letter written by the mayor of York to the steward of Boroughbridge in 1477. The pattern here is the exchange of future services in return for a present favour which we saw above in the letters of the aristocracy. However, rather than presenting the exchange as a personal

¹³⁴*HB:II*, p. 520.

¹³⁵*HB:II*, p. 521.

¹³⁶Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 120, p. 117. See also *SL*, Nos. 198, 206, 274, 312; *PL:II*, Nos. 515, 533, 701, 814 *inter alia*.

¹³⁷*HB:I*, pp. 377-78.

transaction, the mayor couches it in collective, 'democratic' terms.

Wherefore we desire (you) and pray you to be of lyke disposicion toward us and our cocitecyns as we be indelyng to the folkes of your said toun.¹³⁹

At first sight the failure to adopt the vocabulary of lordship seems to represent a lack of confidence at York - a perception that their position was weaker than that of the governors of London. However, it could also be viewed in a different, more positive light, as the assertion of a different kind of identity. The corollary of the aristocratic vocabulary of the London letters is a rather *de haut en bas* view of the city as 'the object governed'. Henry V is informed of the welfare of 'the city' in the third person: it is presented as an inert entity, rather than a body of citizens to which the officers themselves belong. At York, by contrast, the officers construct themselves as *part of* the city, as being as much the representatives of the citizens, as of the king. For example, in a letter to a local aristocrat, the mayor protests:

Master Hastings, I woll doo no preiudice unto the porest of the commons here standing as I stand, for an hundreth powndes, remembreing the othe which I have takyn and in especail in this my begynnyng in thoffice of mairaltye.¹⁴⁰

A similarly 'democratic' picture of the city's identity, is to be seen in the way in which the receipt and writing of letters is described. Take, for example, an entry of 1486:

Also the same day and place, lettres direct frome therl of Northumberland unto the maier <and> aldermen of this cite .. was opynly red in the said counsaill after the tenour ensuyng, wherupon it was determynd that an awnswer upon the contentes of the said lettres shuld be [sic] put in respect unto such tyme as .. othre of the counsaill shuld resort unto the said cite...¹⁴¹

The city of York might be no more democratic than London in its *practices*. But in the construction of its identity, the idea of solidarity, of horizontal ties within the city, appears to be of significantly greater importance.

In fact a closer consideration of the language of these letters, shows that the acceptance of the rhetorical parameters of royal service, could, in fact, be to the city governors'

¹³⁸ *HB:II*, p. 473.

¹³⁹ *HB:I*, p. 87-88.

¹⁴⁰ *HB:II*, p. 545.

¹⁴¹ *HB:II*, p. 469.

advantage. For example, in 1486, the city of York found itself under unwelcome pressure to appoint a nominee of the Earl of Northumberland as the city's new recorder. Defending their demurral on the question, the city invoked a series of incontrovertible, constitutional arguments. First, the decision to defer the appointment had been reached in an impeccably collective, orderly manner:

we assembled in counsaill after certain comunicacion had amonges us .. it was with good deliberacion determyned, concluded and enact remanyng of record in the registres of the said counsaill that thellection .. shuldbe put in respect to the commyng home of our brethre Richard York et Robert Hancok.¹⁴²

Second, the city officers had arrived at this decision on the basis of common interest: 'the liberties and franchises grauntid unto the same cite as the publique wele therof and the quietnesse of us and thol inhabitauntes of the same'. Finally, the officers assure the Earl that they are at his disposition in all things, *except those which directly conflict with their obligations as officers*:

we in our moost humble wise besuch you to be unto us and the same cite as ye have bee at all tymes herbifor especiall and singuler good lord in this behalve and all othre thinges concernyng our liberties and franchises forsaid, *which saved and kepid with our othes and feithes made unto the observacion of the same, we shall indeavour us ... to doo unto you such pleaser and service as for the tyme shall lye in our litill powers*¹⁴³

Had York's officers presented their authority in the private aristocratic terms suggested by correspondents such as Conyers, they would have placed themselves under an obligation to do the Earl's 'pleasure'. By invoking their obligations to their citizens - duties which the Earl had himself recognised in his self-confessed dedication to 'the wele, worship and prouffit of the cite under your conservacion' - the officers were able to avoid compliance with this unwelcome request.¹⁴⁴ They thus commanded a power which an aristocratic persona would not have supplied.

Two overall conclusions can be drawn from a consideration of the rhetoric and prose style of the York letters. First, rather than circumventing or rejecting the language of royal

¹⁴²HB:II, p. 472.

¹⁴³HB:II, p. 473.

¹⁴⁴HB:II, p. 471-71.

service, York officers chose to construct the city almost entirely in its terms. Rather than attempting to create prestige by adopting aspects of an aristocratic persona, the city found ways of negotiating power and social prestige within the identity of ordinary royal service. The second conclusion is that York placed considerably greater emphasis on its regional affiliations than did the capital. Not only did York correspond regularly with representatives of the region as well as the crown, but the city appears to have been partly dependent on the former in order to conduct its negotiations with the latter. As in their seals, so too in the style and rhetoric of their letters, the governors of York evidence an interest in the region which countervails its focus on the sovereign. The identity projected is that of a faithful, but ordinary servant of the crown, rather than of an exclusive aristocratic intimate. In both respects the letters of York present a clear contrast to those of London.

Linguistics

One final level of meaning should be considered, before we can conclude this survey of civic identity, as signified by urban letter-writing practice. Related to, but distinct from, the matter of prose style, is the question of the linguistic information contained in the letters authored, or authorised, by the civic governors of London and York. A consideration of this level of language use gives us differently orientated, but related answers to the questions which we have posed concerning the location of civic writing within the wider framework of fifteenth-century society. In order to interpret this data, however, we must first consider the current debates concerning the development of English in this period.

The main historical outline of the development of written English in this period is simple to describe. Since the nineteenth century scholars have recognised that the later fifteenth century saw a shift away from the use of regional dialects as the normal mode of writing, and towards a national 'standard' similar, though by no means identical, to modern English.

In the words of Arthur Sandved:

The process generally referred to as 'the rise of Standard English' at the end of the M[iddle] E[nglish] period ... can best be described as involving the gradual abandonment of local (and regional) usage, the adoption of one type of written English as a standard over the nation as a whole.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Arthur O. Sandved, 'Prolegomena to a renewed study of the rise of Standard English', in Michael Benskin and M.L. Samuëls, ed., *"So meny people, longages & tonges": Philological Essays in Scots and Medieval*

The chronology of the shift delineated by early philologists has generally been accepted by modern scholars. For example, the editors of the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English* decided to survey material produced between 1350 and 1450, based on the assumption that later texts were too 'highly standardised' to be of interest to the dialect historian.¹⁴⁶ Other aspects of language-change in this period remain highly controversial, however. Perhaps the most fiercely debated question concerns the provenance of the linguistic characteristics which came to be adopted as standard. Based on the evidence of the Paston correspondents, Norman Davies noted in the 1950s that linguistic 'modernisation' appeared to be linked to contact with London and the court rather than with the universities.¹⁴⁷ In a seminal article of 1963 Michael Samuels developed this thesis:

Type IV (which I shall call 'Chancery Standard') consists of that flood of government documents that starts in the years following 1430. Its differences from the language of Chaucer are well known, and it is this type, not its predecessors in London English, that is the basis of modern written English.¹⁴⁸

Samuels's suggestion that it is the language of royal documents which forms the basis of standard English has gained wide, though by no means universal, acceptance.¹⁴⁹ His secondary contention, that the characteristics of this language find their origin in the vernacular of the capital, has, however, met with fierce resistance. For example, John Fisher

English presented to Angus McIntosh (Edinburgh, 1981), pp. 31-42.

¹⁴⁶ Angus McIntosh, 'A New Approach to Middle English Dialectology', *English Studies* 44 (1963):1-11.

¹⁴⁷ Norman Davis, 'The Language of the Pastons', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 40 (1955): 119-44 at pp. 130-13.

¹⁴⁸ M.L. Samuels, 'Some Applications of Middle English Dialectology' in Margaret Laing, ed., *Middle English Dialectology: Essays on some principles and problems* (Aberdeen, 1988), pp. 65-81 at p. 71. In fact the suggestion that modern English finds its origins in the spoken language of the capital has a long pedigree. See for example H.C. Wyld, *A History of Modern Colloquial English* (London, 1920), pp. 4-5 and Asta Kihlbom, *A Contribution to the Study of Fifteenth Century English* (Uppsala, 1926). However, these studies were not undertaken to modern scholarly standards.

¹⁴⁹ Norman Blake, 'Introduction' in idem, ed., *Cambridge History of the English Language: Volume 2, 1066-1476* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 1-23. By contrast, Norman Davis appears to have become sceptical of the Chancery thesis, concluding a study of two Paston correspondents: 'The total impression given by these varied forms, and others like them, is that even at this date well on in the fifteenth century a generally observed written standard was still far from attainment in the fairly reputable society represented by these two brothers. Which elements would eventually be adopted into it could seldom be foreseen, and the part played by Chancery in its evolution can hardly have been decisive.' Norman Davis, 'The Language of Two Brothers in the Fifteenth Century' in E.G. Stanley and Douglas Gray, *Five Hundred Years of Words and Sounds: A Festschrift for Eric Dobson* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 23-28 at p. 28.

argues that 'Chancery standard' was an 'official language'. Rather than deriving from the speech of Londoners, he sees standardisation as the product of the institutional structures of royal government. The particular features of the standard are understood in his argument to derive partly from imitation of earlier standards, such as the so-called 'Wycliffite language', and partly from the linguistic preferences of the personnel of Chancery, many of whom came from the North of England.¹⁵⁰ Malcolm Richardson and Susan Hughes have followed Fisher's lead, arguing that Chancery Standard is a language with bureaucratic rather than regional origins.¹⁵¹

Given the importance of understanding the features of London language to this particular debate, it is unsurprising to find that our corpus of London letters has been subject to close scrutiny.¹⁵² Scholars who have analysed these texts have drawn two conclusions. The first observation on which they agree is that the language of these missives is not identical to that found in royal documents after 1430.¹⁵³ For example, the civic scribes prefer 'between', where Chancery writers favoured 'betwixt'. City clerks use 'are' as the third person plural of 'to be', where royal scribes have 'be'.¹⁵⁴ They also use some phonetic spellings, such as 'hye' for 'high' which are rare at Chancery.¹⁵⁵ The second point which attracts the consensus of the critics, however, is that overall the degree of linguistic similarity between these letters and Chancery documents is very high. As Fisher has shown, the Southern pronouns 'hem' and 'her' and the more 'modern' 'them' and 'their' are used in similar proportions in the

¹⁵⁰John H. Fisher, 'Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English in the Fifteenth Century', *Speculum* 52 (1977): 870-899.

¹⁵¹Malcolm Richardson 'Henry V, the English Chancery and Chancery English' *Speculum* 55 (1980): 726-50; Susan E. Hughes, 'Guildhall and Chancery English 1377-1422', *Guildhall Studies in London History* 4 (1980): 53-62.

¹⁵²Samuels discusses documents in Chambers and Daunt's anthology, though he does not mention the London letters specifically. These he assigns to 'Type III', the stage in London English we see as preceding 'Chancery English'. More precise analyses are offered by Fisher, Hughes and Richardson in the articles cited in note 153 above.

¹⁵³Fisher, 'Chancery and the Emergence of Standard', p. 897.

¹⁵⁴For discussion of this usage at Chancery see *ACE*, pp. 47-48.

¹⁵⁵*ACE*, pp. 29-30.

Chancery and Guildhall texts.¹⁵⁶ Writers in both arenas also prefer 'which' to 'wich' and other orthographic forms.¹⁵⁷ Like Chancery scribes, the authors of the London letters write 'such', spelled in the modern fashion, rather than the variant 'swich' found in earlier London documents.¹⁵⁸ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the three letters written by the city in the second half of the fifteenth century show an even greater conformity with the norms of Chancery than do those composed in the first decades.¹⁵⁹ For example, of nine occurrences of the relative pronoun 'which' in these letters, only one is spelled in non-Chancery fashion, as 'wich'. Pronouns are now always in the form 'them' and 'their', never 'hem' and 'her'. Phonetic spellings are now consistently avoided; 'high' is always spelled with the etymological 'gh', and never as 'hye'.

A survey of language in our sample of York letters also reveals clear evidence of Chancery influence. In these texts, linguistic forms shown to be characteristic of northern language in the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English* appear to be consistently rejected in favour of Chancery alternatives. For example, in no letter do 'ilke' or 'whilk', the northern equivalent of Chancery 'each' and 'which', appear.¹⁶⁰ 'Suld' and 'sall', the Northern forms of 'should' and 'shall',¹⁶¹ are also absent, as is 'mikel', a form of the modern 'much' which is attested in the counties north of the Wash.¹⁶² At the same time as avoiding words which are marked as being northern, certain characteristics of this writing seem to show a deliberate attempt to imitate aspects of Chancery style. For example, 'shew', the form of the verb spelled with the medial 'e', described by Fisher as a 'Chancery shibboleth', occurs on

¹⁵⁶Fisher, 'Chancery and the Emergence of Standard English', p. 897.

¹⁵⁷For 'which' as the Chancery form Richardson, 'Henry V and Chancery English', p. 733 and *ACE*, p. 399.

¹⁵⁸For 'such' as the Chancery form Hughes, 'Guildhall and Chancery English', p. 58; Richardson, 'Henry V and Chancery English', p. 733.

¹⁵⁹LB K, ff. 292-92b; LB L, f. 78. (1457 and 1471). This is based on my own observation, rather than on the analysis of Fisher et al.

¹⁶⁰For evidence that these forms are characteristic of northern language see *LALME*:I, p. 325, Maps. 83 and 84.

¹⁶¹*LALME*:I, p. 341, Map 148.

¹⁶²*LALME*:I, p. 331, Maps 105 and 106.

at least three occasions in these letters.¹⁶³ More common are 'oon' for one, and 'doo' for do, both of which are referenced as Chancery traits by Fisher.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, the preference of some later York clerks to double the 'o' in other words - most given as 'moost', so as 'soo', and no as 'noo' - might perhaps be understood as examples of hypercorrection, that is, as the product of an excessive concern to adopt prestigious language, which betrays misunderstanding of the norms.

However, though they are considerably later than most of the London documents, the York letters continue to diverge from the incipient standard in a number of areas. First, though not a majority, non-standard verbal forms continue to be seen until the close of the century.

This can be seen in two categories. First, Chancery norms dictated that the third person singular end in 'th', and that plural forms terminate either in 'n' or in a zero inflection.¹⁶⁵

Though the letters seem to avoid the northern '-s' ending in the singular, the plural form occurs both in these letters and in civic memoranda written in the same period. Thus, in 1482, the city addresses the Duke of Gloucester '*we* your humble servantes humbly *recommandes* us to your gude grace'.¹⁶⁶ Five years later, the king is saluted in almost identical terms '*we* in our moost humble wise *recommandes* us unto your moost royall magestye'.¹⁶⁷ Second, though 'be/ben', the Southern plural of the verb 'to be', had become established as the normal form at Chancery, the northern form 'are' can be found in a number of letters. For example, the city's recorder informed the authorities in 1486 that the officers in the exchequer '*er* not verey certaine nor stable of ther opinion'.¹⁶⁸ A year later, the city informed the sovereign '*we er* and evermore shalbe your true and feithfull

¹⁶³ See *HB:I*, p. 9; *HB:II*, pp. 495, 545, 580. For the assertion that 'shew' is a feature of Chancery style, see Fisher, 'Chancery and the Emergence of Standard', p. 884.

¹⁶⁴ For 'doo' or 'doone' see *HB:I*, pp. 9, 47, 87; *HB:II*, pp. 377, 472, 475, 495, 502, 516. For 'oon' see *HB:I*, pp. 163; *HB:II*, pp. 377, 472, 475, 495. For 'noo', 'soo' and 'moost', see *HB:II*, p. 347, 495, 502, 516 *inter alia*. For the claim that 'oon' is a Chancery form, see Fisher, 'Chancery and Standard Written English', p. 884. For 'doo' see the diagnostic index in *ACE*, p. 331.

¹⁶⁵ *LALME:I*, pp. 466-67, Maps. 645, 646, 652 and 653.

¹⁶⁶ *HB:II*, p. 703.

¹⁶⁷ *HB:II*, p. 549.

¹⁶⁸ *HB:II*, p. 524.

subgiettes'.¹⁶⁹ Finally, a number of letters, and indeed contemporary civic documents, show a continued preference for forms such as 'them', 'their', 'would' and 'know', spelled with a medial 'a'. As the *LALME* dot map shows, the retention of medial 'a' in positions where 'ā' was used in Old English or Norse, was a trait characteristic of the northern counties.¹⁷⁰ It is not characteristic of Chancery language, however.¹⁷¹

This preliminary survey suggests that the authorities at London were more concerned than those at York to conform to the emerging national standard, which was closely associated with royal governance. However, in order to establish this with certainty, we must consider in detail some of the problems raised by the secondary literature on standardisation. As we have seen, Samuels has suggested that Chancery Standard is a natural outgrowth of London English. If this is so, then the swifter and more complete adoption of royal norms at London would be a natural phenomenon reflecting no more than the accident of the city's location. If Fisher's argument is correct, however, then the language of the letters suggests a particular commitment on the part of London's governors to the project of standardisation.

As we have seen, earlier attempts to determine the relationship between London speech and the later written standard have been inconclusive; no definitive answer may be offered here to a question of such complexity. However, a comparison of the London letters to two bodies of contemporary material does yield some suggestive results. For the early series of letters, a good body of comparative data is provided by English wills proved at the commissary court of London between 1398 and 1430.¹⁷² Because these documents conform to a different set of conventions to the letters, areas of linguistic comparison are not as great as might be wished.¹⁷³ However, this material does have one significant advantage over that debated by Fisher and Samuels: because the testators offer descriptions of themselves, as

¹⁶⁹*HB:II*, p. 549.

¹⁷⁰*LALME:I*, p. 464, Map 633.

¹⁷¹See *ACE*, diagnostic index, passim.

¹⁷²Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *The Fifty Earliest English Wills in the Court of Probate, London*, EETS o.s. 78 (1882).

¹⁷³Wills are written in the first person singular, while civic letters are often written in the plural form.

for example 'citizen of London', we can be certain that the material we are studying is that of individuals who were either natives or permanent residents of the capital city, rather than recent immigrants.¹⁷⁴ Two clear conclusions can be drawn from a comparison of these two bodies of London writing. The first is that the language of the wills, like that of the London letters, is a great deal closer to Chancery Standard than the London English of the later fourteenth century, as described by Samuels. Like the Guildhall authors, the testators rarely use the adverbial ending 'ich' and 'lich' which was preferred by fourteenth-century writers, but disfavoured by royal scribes writing after 1430.¹⁷⁵ In both bodies of material too the Southern forms 'hey/hem/her' have lost their dominance; they now alternate with the more progressive 'they/them/their'.¹⁷⁶ In three distinct areas, however, the language of the testators is noticeably less 'progressive' than that of the London letters. First, the London letters contain far fewer past participles with a 'y' prefix than do the contemporary wills.¹⁷⁷ Second, in the probate material phonetic spellings occur with noticeably greater frequency; where the London letters written after 1419 always use etymological spellings such as 'right', 'high' and 'mighty', in four of the wills from the 1430s 'high' is spelled without the palatal as 'hye' or 'hie'.¹⁷⁸ Third, the majority of will-makers continue to use the southern singular first person pronoun 'y'.¹⁷⁹ Though first person pronouns in civic letters are always in the plural, Susan Hughes's survey of other material written in the Letter-Books before 1422 shows that 'T', the form preferred by Chancery scribes, is also that generally used by

¹⁷⁴Fisher has concluded from a comparison of royal documents and the Brewers' First Book that Chancery Standard is not identical to London English. Fisher 'Chancery Standard', pp. 896-97. However, Samuels has objected that though the amalgam which occurs in this document may represent a London dialect 'this particular combination does not recur and cannot be shown to be any more than idiosyncratic'. M.L. Samuels, 'Spelling and Dialect in the Late and Post-Middle English Periods' in Samuels and Benskin, eds., *"So meny people longages and tonges"*, pp. 43-54 at p. 50.

¹⁷⁵'Everich' occurs in the wills of Robert Corn, John Toker and John Burnet. The 'lich' ending does not occur in any of the wills.

¹⁷⁶'They' is quite general in the wills. However, 'hem' for 'them' occurs in eight testaments (Robert Corn, Richard Yonge, John Credy, Richard Whyteman, William Fitz-Harry, John Barnet, Walter Mangeard and Margarete Asshcombe). 'Her' for 'their' is seen in three wills (John Plot, John Credy and Roger Elmesley).

¹⁷⁷Verbs with a 'y' prefix occur in seven wills (John Pyncheon, John Plot, Robert Averay, Richard Whytemen, Walter Newent, William Fitz-Harry and Roger Elmesley).

¹⁷⁸The phonetic spelling occurs only in the first two letters from London to the king. Chamber and Daunt, eds., *A Book of London English*, pp. 68-70 and 72-73. This spelling occurs in four wills (Alys Chirche, William Fitz-Harry, Walter Mangeard, Roger Elmesley).

¹⁷⁹This form occurs in fourteen of the wills in our sample.

London civic clerks in this period.¹⁸⁰

This survey tends to suggest that the language of the Guildhall letters was not that generally written in London in the early fifteenth century. Yet though suggestive, this evidence cannot be regarded as conclusive.¹⁸¹ When we move to the second half of the century, however, better comparative evidence becomes available. For this period we have a small but diverse sample of letters penned by residents or natives of London. As these texts are all autograph, and extant in original copies, they provide reliable evidence of the linguistic norms of these individuals, all of whom again were either natives or residents of the capital. These texts suggest still more strongly that the language of the London Letter-Books is not, in fact, a reflection of local speech. In categories where the letters of the civic authorities conform precisely to Chancery norms, ordinary London letter-writers follow quite different conventions. First, in the later Guildhall letters third person pronouns are always given as 'they/them/their'. However, in the letters of Thomas Henham and William Cely, both of whom were London apprentices in the wool trade, the southern forms 'hem' and 'her' continue to alternate with the more modern forms.¹⁸² Second, the civic letters of 1457 and 1471 use the spelling 'which', the form which Fisher's research shows also to be dominant at Chancery.¹⁸³ Amongst our Londoners, a wide variety of non-standard forms can be seen: Robert Cely, Richard Cely the elder and Goddard Oxbridge write 'weche' and 'wheche'¹⁸⁴; William Cely, Thomas Henham and John Croke write 'wyche' or 'whyche'.¹⁸⁵ Third, the majority of writers in our wider sample use 'sch' to represent the phonetic value ʃ; for

¹⁸⁰The Northern pronoun *I* is likewise dominant in both Guildhall and Chancery English, with only the Plea and Memoranda Rolls including any examples of the Southern *y*. Hughes, 'Guildhall and Chancery English', p. 54.

¹⁸¹First, these documents are copies of originals. There is therefore a danger that the language which has survived represents that of the copyists, or more probably a mixture of that of the author and the registering clerk. Though against this, the will of a Sir Roger Salwayn, Knight, of York, contains a number of northern linguistic features not seen in the other wills in this register. A second problem is the absence of a modern edition of these wills; it is difficult to be confident of the accuracy of the linguistic patterns depicted in documents which may contain transcription errors.

¹⁸²*SL*, No. 163, pp. 259-60; *CL*, Nos. 77, 115 and 179, pp. 68, 104-05 and 164-65.

¹⁸³*LB K*, ff. 292, 292b; *LB L*, f. 78. *ACE*, p. 399.

¹⁸⁴*CL*, Nos. 12, 13, 15, 35, pp. 11-12, 12, 13-14, 31. *SL*, Nos. 156 and 167, pp. 261-62 and 264-65.

¹⁸⁵*CL*, Nos. 156, 160 and 187, pp. 142-43, 145 and 172; *SL*, Nos. 163 and 183, pp. 259-60 and pp. 281-82.

example, William Cely writes 'schypps', 'schorttly', 'schall'.¹⁸⁶ John Croke, son of a London alderman, writes 'sche' for 'she' and 'schowyng' for 'showyng'.¹⁸⁷ In the civic letters and in royal documents, on the other hand, this value is represented as it is in modern English, by 'sh'.¹⁸⁸ Finally, like the testators of the early century, many late century letter-writers show a continuing preference for the southern, and non-Chancery first person pronoun 'y'.¹⁸⁹ This form is used, for example, by John Croke, William Maryon and by John and George Cely.¹⁹⁰

This evidence seems to suggest strongly that the language of the corporation's letters does not represent some kind of 'London standard'. In areas in which private London writers show variety or uncertainty, civic material evidences considerable self-consistency. Features which are shared by private citizens, and which might be taken as indicative of regional conventions, tend not to occur in the Guildhall letters. This suggests that the language of the Guildhall letters reflects self-conscious imitation of the conventions of royal documents on the part of the London authorities. This raises one obvious problem, however. As Fisher and Richardson have shown, Chancery Standard lacks consistency before 1430. Sandved has also pointed to the comparative sparsity of documents produced in English before this date. How then can the conventions of Chancery have exerted an influence on the language of a series of letters written between 1417 and 1430? Though the data has yet to be interpreted in this fashion, it seems to me that the studies of Hughes and Richardson, when viewed together, may provide a solution. Richardson has shown that many of the characteristics of Chancery standard are anticipated in documents written by Henry V's signet office; these include the letters sent by the king to the London authorities after

¹⁸⁶CL, Nos. 77, 82, 131, 155, 160, 181, 183, 187, 240, 243, pp. 68, 72, 117-18, 142, 145, 166-67, 168-69, 172, 241-43, 245-46.

¹⁸⁷SL, No. 183, pp. 281-82. See also Goddard Oxbridge and Thomas Henham, *ibid*, Nos. 213 and 222, pp. 305-06 and p. 316. See also William Maryon, Richard Cely the elder, Robert Cely, and John Cely, in CL, Nos. 5, 9, 11, 35, 100, pp. 5-6, 8-9, 10-1, 31, 88).

¹⁸⁸For example, the letter to Henry VI contains the forms 'shippes' and 'sheweth', LB K, f. 292. See also words listed in 'sh' in ACE, pp. 382-83.

¹⁸⁹According to Fisher's diagnostic index 'I' occurs 154 times in Chancery documents, 'Y' a mere 5 times.

¹⁹⁰A number of other non-standard features are also seen in sufficient number to suggest status as written convention or dependence on spoken language. These include the use of the third person present indicative ending in -s (he says, rather than he sayeth); the use of 'w' were 'v' would be usual in modern standard English, in words such as 'hawe'/'have'; the addition of 'h' to words of non-French origin which begin with a vowel, e.g., 'honderstande', 'hoder' for 'other', 'ham' for 'am'.

1415.¹⁹¹ Hughes' study of Guildhall documents shows that the language of the Letter-Books, in which the letters were registered, is more 'progressive' in character than that found in the Plea and Memoranda Rolls, produced by corporation clerks in the same period. Though it is impossible to be completely certain, it seems very likely that the 'standard' character of the language of the London letters is the result of self-conscious imitation of the 'king's English'. Perhaps actually rejecting dialectal features current in the capital, the London clerks choose to associate the city linguistically with royal authority. The conclusion seems clear. From the beginning of the fifteenth century national standing appears to take precedence over regional solidarity in the priorities of London civic governors.

Contextual evidence seems to confirm our initial impression that the letters sent by the mayor and aldermen of London reflect a deliberate attempt to emulate royal language. How does knowledge of the wider linguistic context affect our perception of the intentions of York governors? As we have seen, McIntosh's initial supposition, when framing the guidelines for the Linguistic Atlas project, was that language written in the final quarter of the fifteenth century would be highly standardised. The first step in interpreting the York evidence must therefore be to establish whether the avoidance of northern dialect words such as 'whilk' or 'mikel' reflects self-consciousness choice, or simply the comparatively late date of their composition. In fact, the civic registers of York provide strong evidence in support of the former contention.¹⁹² A significant number of the letters sent to the city by members of the northern aristocracy contain linguistic features which are not found in texts written by civic scribes in the same period. For example, in the final quarter of the fifteenth century the city received five 'letters testimonial' containing the Northern version of standard 'much', 'mikell' or 'mykell'.¹⁹³ One correspondent of 1478, and another of 1481, used the Northern 'whilke', rather than standard pronominal form 'which'.¹⁹⁴ A third, of

¹⁹¹Richardson, 'Henry V and Chancery English', *passim*.

¹⁹²In the course of their work, researchers on the Atlas were forced to abandon their initial assumptions; it emerged that late fifteenth-century records contained plentiful examples of northern language. See James Milroy, 'Middle English Dialectology', in Norman Blake, ed., *Cambridge History of the English Language* (Cambridge, 1992):II, pp. 156-207 at p. 185.

¹⁹³James Raine, ed. *A Volume of English Miscellanies*, Surtees Society 85 (1888), pp. 35, 37, 39-40, 41, 51.

¹⁹⁴Raine, *English Miscellanies*, pp. 37 and 39.

1484, preferred 'ilke', to its Chancery equivalent, 'each'.¹⁹⁵ Many of these letters are written by individuals based further north than York; the appearance of such features does not prove conclusively that the civic authorities were avoiding language still current in Yorkshire. However, the evidence of texts submitted by city guilds shows clearly that northern language was current not simply in the county but in the city itself. For example, the ordinances of the Tapiters, of 1472, and a petition of the commons, of 1474/5 both contain the word 'whilke'.¹⁹⁶ The Cappers' ordinances of 1482 contain the words 'sall' and 'als', the latter the form which substituted for *as* in the north of England.¹⁹⁷ The ordinances of the Vintners, of 1482/3 also contain the latter word, while those of the Carpenters of the same date consistently prefer the Northern ending in the third person present indicative, eg. 'he so offendes', 'he lettes', 'he makys'.¹⁹⁸ This latter linguistic feature, firmly identified as northern in the *LALME*, was virtually unknown at Chancery.¹⁹⁹ In all these respects, this group of documents, all of which were penned in the city of York, show a significantly greater allegiance to northern forms than do the letters sent by the civic authorities in the same period. Clearly then, the civic authorities were deliberately eschewing some linguistic features which were marked as northern, in favour of those associated with the incipient standard.

However, if civic scribes were consistently avoiding certain terms, why are other features characteristic of northern dialect retained? Two distinct, if not opposing explanations are possible. The first is that the governors of York were simply unaware that these linguistic features differed from those of clerks working in the royal bureaucracy. This is perhaps suggested by the particular nature of York's deviations from standard. For example, the retention of Old English 'ā', is strongly associated with northern language by the linguistic

¹⁹⁵Raine, *English Miscellanies*, p. 41.

¹⁹⁶*YMB:II*, pp. 196 and 246.

¹⁹⁷*YMB:II*, pp. 284-85.

¹⁹⁸*YMB:II*, pp. 276 and 278-83.

¹⁹⁹See *ACE*, p. 45 'In verb forms, the most evident difference from MnE [in Chancery] is the use of *eth/ep* as the ending for the 3rd person singular and for the imperative.' See also the explanation of the northern verbal paradigm in Angus McIntosh, 'Present Indicative Plural Forms in the Later Middle English of the North Midlands' in Margaret Laing, ed., *Middle English Dialectology* (Aberdeen, 1989), pp. 116-22 at p. 116.

Atlas, but it also has a strong minority presence at Chancery. It is therefore possible that the distinction between 'e' and 'a' would not have been particularly marked in this period, and that the use of the latter should not be seen as a rejection of standard forms. Similar arguments might be formulated in relation to the distinction between 'are' and 'be'. According to Fisher:

So much of Chancery style is conditional that it is hard to tell whether the prevalence of *be* is purely stylistic or sometimes morphological: e.g. if it so be.²⁰⁰

It therefore seems quite likely that the distinction between the two forms was not clearly perceived by the governors of York in the fifteenth century.

The second possibility suggests a greater degree of knowledge on the part of the city officers. Samuels has suggested that in some circumstances writers strive not so much towards standard, but towards a 'colourless regional language'. This is achieved by the replacement of local forms 'not by those of Chancery Standard, but by other forms in very widespread use, especially if they were phonetically well suited to function as forms intermediate between dialect and standard'. Such an interpretation might make some sense of the York pattern, though it is by no means conclusive: the dot maps in the Linguistic Atlas suggest that 'mikel' had a narrower geographical distributions than spellings with a medial 'a' corresponding with Old English 'ā', for example.²⁰¹

The hypothesis that York was simply less concerned than London to imitate every detail of royal language is also supported by internal evidence. First, Matthew Holford has shown that the language of Thomas Mynskip, common clerk of York for 1481-2, contains not just Yorkshire but East Anglian traits. That the retention of these features 'was no obstacle not only to civic clerical employment, but to holding one of the city's highest administrative posts' seems to argue against a rigorous campaign to imitate of the king's English on the part of the city.²⁰² Second, the registers evidence a notable lack of standardisation in the

²⁰⁰ *ACE*, p. 49.

²⁰¹ *LALME*, Map 106, p. 331; Map. 83, p. 325.

²⁰² M. Holford, 'The English of the Civic Registers of Late Medieval York', unpublished MA dissertation, University of York, 1997, p. 43.

spelling of common words; for example, mayor is spelled no fewer than three different ways in a five years.²⁰³ This seems to contrast with the practice at London: it suggests a comparatively relaxed attitude towards language, beyond the elimination of stigmatised terms such as 'whilk'.²⁰⁴

The linguistic features of the letters of London and York seem closely to support the other observations which we have made concerning the seals and the stylistic and rhetorical features of these documents. As in their seals and their rhetoric, the London letters evidence a sophisticated sensibility. They demonstrate an interest in 'fashion' or prestige at the expense of local values. Above all they show a concern to place the relationship with the king at the heart of conceptions of civic identity. At York the story is rather different. In language variety, as with other aspects of the letters, we can identify a clear desire to construct the city as prestigious; just as the city's seal are of the expensive, double-sided type, so in its diction it allies itself with the prestigious language of the king. Yet at York, the drive towards prestige, or towards identification with royal authority, is tempered by other priorities. In its seals we see that, either from conservatism, or from loyalty to local craftsmen, the most elaborate, southern models, were not followed. In language variety a similar hesitation is apparent. Either from ignorance, or from a desire to highlight its regional links, York does not adopt the 'standard' chosen by its southern cousin, but retains local linguistic colouring.

²⁰³ 'maiur', 'maire', 'maier'. *HB:II*, pp. 479, 570 and 571.

²⁰⁴ This is my impression based on reading a significant number of entries in Letter Books I, K and L.

PART III: EPISTOLARY DISCOURSES OF INTIMACY, c. 1400-1600

CHAPTER FOUR:

DISCOURSES OF INTIMACY IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

Over the past forty years the area of scholarship broadly termed 'Family History' has generated a wide range of questions about the constitution of the household and the nature of family life in past time.¹ Much of the scholarship in this field has been demographic, taking household formation as its focus.² However, since the publication of Philippe Ariès's *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* in 1960, the nature of family roles and the qualitative content of relationships has formed an alternative locus of investigation. According to Ariès's provocative thesis the family, as an institution based on emotional, rather than social or economic bonds, is a very recent invention:

An analysis of iconography leads us to conclude that the concept of the family was unknown in the Middle Ages, that it originated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and that it reached its full expression in the seventeenth century.³

Over the past thirty years two clearly defined, but opposing, ideas of development have emerged, each responding to Ariès's argument. On the one hand Shorter, Flandrin and Stone have broadly followed Ariès, locating the emergence of a 'modern family' type, based on sentiment, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁴ Houlbrooke, MacFarlane and O'Day on the other hand, reject this theory of 'modernisation'. In their

¹Useful reviews of this scholarship are Louise A. Tilly and Miriam Cohen, 'Does the Family have a History?', *Social Science History* 6 (1982):181-99 and Tamara K. Hareven, 'The History of the Family and the Complexity of Social Change', *American Historical Review* 96 (1991):95-124.

²See in particular Peter Laslett and Richard Wall, *Household and family in past time: comparative studies in the size and structure of domestic groups* (Cambridge, 1972).

³Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 341. This view was restated by Ariès in his introduction to the third volume of the *History of Private Life* series. 'Ultimately the family became the focus of private life. Its significance changed. No longer was it merely an economic unit for the sake of whose reproduction everything had to be sacrificed. No longer was it a restraint on individual freedom, a place in which power was wielded by women. It became something it had never been before: a refuge, to which people fled in order to escape the scrutiny of outsiders; an emotional centre; and a place where, for better or for worse, children were the focus of attention.' Philippe Ariès, 'Introduction', in Roger Chartier, ed., *A History of Private Life III: Passions of the Renaissance*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, 1989), p. 8.

⁴Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (London, 1976); Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (Abridged edition: London, 1979); Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household and Sexuality*, trans. Richard Southern (Cambridge, 1979).

view an essential continuity can be traced in English family relations from at least the fifteenth century onwards.⁵ According to Ralph Houlbrooke, for example, in the period 1450 to 1700 the family changed little either in form or in function:

There were some changes in ideals of family life but this was both complex and gradual ... The key notions of conjugal affection, husbandly and parental authority and responsibility and filial duty originated long before this period began.⁶

Though some development can be seen, the large scale movements which Shorter, Ariès and Stone have seen as the engines of change - the decline of feudalism, changes in religious ideas, the Enlightenment - are not accorded a dramatic or decisive influence by these authors.

At the heart of this work, and indeed of the conflict between these different schools, lie problems of interpretation. Historians attempting to chart the nature of relationships lack personal sources for periods before the seventeenth century, and are therefore heavily dependent on prescriptive material on the one hand, and diaries and letters on the other. As we have seen, writers in this tradition approach 'personal sources' such as letters with considerable caution. According to Stone, for example:

these are highly personal documents and, therefore, often very idiosyncratic, reflecting the quirks and quiddities of the individual psyche of the author, as well as the shared norms of social and moral behaviour of persons of his social class, education and time.⁷

For Houlbrooke a different concern is more pressing, the danger of comparing documents which are essentially unlike :

The increasing readiness of members of the propertied classes to write rather than dictate their letters made possible a new epistolary privacy. This in turn encouraged a loosening of formalities, a fuller expression of intimate feelings and a more discursive treatment of personal pleasures.⁸

These writers are keenly aware of the difficulties of using letters; yet the methodology which

⁵Rosemary O'Day, *The Family and Family Relationships, 1500-1900* (Basingstoke and London, 1994); Alan MacFarlane, *Marriage and Love in England, 1300-1840* (Oxford, 1986); Ralph Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1450-1700* (Harlow and New York, 1984).

⁶Houlbrooke, *English Family*, p. 252.

⁷Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, p. 25.

⁸Houlbrooke, *English Family*, p. 4.

they adopt, the juxtaposition of a variety of such sources, frustrates their attempts to resolve these problems. Contrary to his own claims, Stone does not examine either a long enough series, or a broad enough range of material to offset the problems of 'idiosyncrasy' which he has described. Though Houlbrooke is aware that information concerning writers' literacy and their conceptions of letters form an essential prerequisite to understanding changes in this genre, little space is devoted in his book to examining these issues. The purpose of the present chapter is to remedy both these defects. First, I will examine as broad a body of material as possible, assembling a body of evidence large enough to offset the problems of atypicality.⁹ Second, following the lead of Linda Pollock, who has argued that each genre of 'personal writing' should be examined in its own cultural setting, I will consider changes in letter-writing in their precise linguistic and generic context.¹⁰ Only by examining an extensive sample of letters within their precise cultural framework can the extent of change in family relationships in this period be evaluated with any accuracy.

The problem of familiarity

Before we can begin this task, one further problem requires examination. The debate, as currently constituted, turns on the emotional attitudes associated with family roles at different periods in past time. Yet even brief consideration reveals a number of difficulties associated with such a project. How can the meaning of past utterance be understood when it describes a subject as intangible as feeling? Even if the language in which emotion is described is accepted as faithful, rather than distorted or stereotyped, how can we be confident that we can construe it correctly? The solution which I propose falls into two parts. First, it may indeed be impossible to reconstruct sensory experience, but it is possible to document conventional attitudes associated with particular relationships at different moments in the past. In this chapter our aim will be to reconstruct not the vagaries of individual human relationships, or the still more evanescent nature of feelings which passed between people, but the changes in these conventional social postures or attitudes. Our goal

⁹An attempt has been made to examine as wide a range of material as possible in this study. However, constraints of time have made it impossible to examine documents which are not held in national archives and has also limited the quantity of unpublished material which could be considered. It is to be hoped that some of the large volume of unpublished letters will appear *in extenso* in good critical editions over the coming years, and that more documents relating to the earlier period may come to light. In anticipation of this, the conclusions presented in the current study must be offered as provisional.

¹⁰Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 10.

will be to document the cultural space occupied by nuclear kinship, as a cultural category at different points of the period.

The answer to the second question, as to how historical language can be interpreted, will be the same as in preceding chapters; careful historical and discursive contextualisation. A good place to start developing an approach towards the construction of relationships of intimacy in historical letters, might be to explore the semiotics of contemporary correspondence. In modern English usage a comparatively clear functional distinction exists between 'personal letters', which are addressed to friends and family, and 'business letters', which are directed to high status individuals with whom the writer is not acquainted. Distinctions between the two types can be observed in a number of elements of presentation. The most obvious of these, on a linguistic level, is the conventional difference between the salutation and close of personal and business letters - the use of titles and terms of respect in the latter, and personal names and expressions of sentiment in the former. More subtle differences have, however, also been identified by sociolinguists. In a rigorous analysis of the stylistic differences between a variety of genres, Douglas Biber identifies a significant number of distinctions between what he designates as 'personal' and 'professional' letters.¹¹ For example, personal letters are lexically simple and repetitive, contain a high number of contractions and few adverbial or relative subclauses. Professional letters display a more complex vocabulary, have a high occurrence of nouns and nominal phrases; subclauses, beginning with relatives or conjunctions, are a common stylistic feature.

Another area in which differences between these two sub-genres is particularly marked is that of visual or material presentation. Perhaps most important is the difference between the graphic styles of the two types of letter. In a letter-writer published in 1984 the reader is advised:

If you are writing a business letter, it should be typed. In other cases, handwriting - as long as it is legible - is perfectly acceptable and is indeed preferable when the letter is of a personal nature.¹²

As recently as 1994 writers are reminded that handwriting is preferred in personal

¹¹Douglas Biber, *Variation across Speech and Writing* (Cambridge and New York, 1988), pp. 122-45. See also M. J. Homzie, M. E. Kotsonis and C. C. M. Toris, 'Letter Writing Differences: Relative Status Effects', *Language and Speech* 24 (1981): 377-85.

¹²Derek Hall, ed., *Letters for every occasion* (London, 1984), p. 7

correspondence; it indicates that the writer has taken trouble to produce an individualised message, and avoids suspicion that 'a standard, typewritten form of words is being foisted on the recipient, or that a third party might have had a hand in the composition of the letter'.¹³ A second important indication of the relationship between the writer and the addressee is the layout of the letter. One recent authority suggests:

it would seem unnecessary and a trifle grand to put the recipient's name and address at the top of a personal letter, or even at the top of a semi-formal one.¹⁴

Wider material distinctions are also usually seen. A business letter is likely to be written on a larger, higher quality sheets of paper than a personal missive, and enclosed in a different kind of envelope. In the words of a prescriptive writer:

The appearance of a person's letter has, in many ways the same effect as has the way he dresses. Just as you would be unlikely to wear casual clothes to an interview for a job, so you would be wise to avoid the use of floral-decorated notepapers for business letters.¹⁵

In the following analysis equal weight will be given to two factors. First, an attempt will be made, on the basis of both direct and contextual evidence, to determine whether material distinctions were made between letters sent to members of the nuclear family, as opposed to other addressees. Second, the language of the letters will be closely analysed. Through close reading an attempt will be made to determine whether family letters are different to those sent to strangers in their style, vocabulary or their rhetoric.

The Early Fifteenth Century

i. Material Practices

The first body of material which we examine is that of the letters written in the first quarter of the century. Because they are somewhat dispersed, and also perhaps, because many are written in Anglo-Norman French, these letters have been little used to date as sources of evidence for attitudes towards social relationships. For this period, the material evidence is rather weaker than for those periods which will be examined later in this chapter. The main

¹³Nigel Rees, *Bloomsbury Guide to Letter Writing* (London, 1994), p. 8.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁵Bernard Smith, *Better Letters. A Guide to Proper Letter Writing* (Frome, 1985), p. 3.

problem is that a significant proportion of these letters are found in formularies, a context in which they survive as copies, divested of their original handwriting, layout and seals. From letters preserved in these contexts, it is almost impossible to deduce whether letters to familiars and intimates were distinguished materially from those addressed to strangers. The letters which have survived in the original, though few in number, do however offer some indications of material practices. This can be strengthened through the use of contextual evidence concerning contemporary developments in literacy and sigillography.

The area in which material evidence is strongest for this period is that of royal sealing practice. This suggests that there may indeed have been a practical distinction between 'public' instruments and 'private' letters. By the thirteenth century the royal *secretum*, or privy seal, which had originated as a personal instrument in the hands of the king, had been fully assimilated into the machinery of government. However, the fourteenth century saw the introduction a new kind of 'secret' seal, the signet. This gave the king a new way of producing documents which were independent of the control of the 'public' machine of royal bureaucracy. In the words of Tout:

the secret seal of the fourteenth century had no organised office. The seal was the king's personal affair, and its custody was an incident of the functions of some high domestic of the household in constant attendance on his person.¹⁶

By the later Middle Ages 'privy' or 'secret' seals were also beginning to be used by other individuals, and particularly members of the nobility.¹⁷ The mottoes borne by many surviving examples, such as 'prive su et poy conu', or 'frange lege tege', suggest that these seals were used to close letters which were considered personal or confidential.¹⁸

A conceptual difference does therefore clearly seem to exist in this period between 'public' and 'private' missives. What is less clear, however, is that this distinction corresponds in any

¹⁶T. F. Tout, *Chapters in the Administrative History of Medieval England*, 6 vols. (Manchester, 1920-33):V, p.178.

¹⁷'Gradually over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries landowners followed the king's lead in having two seals: a great seal for authenticating public statements and a private or 'privy' seal for sending letters.' Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307*, second edition (Oxford, 1993), p. 315.

¹⁸ 'An undertaking to keep secrets was appropriate for sealing up a personal letter.' Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, pp. 314-15. For examples of other mottoes of this kind, and other apparently 'informal' examples, such as 'Je su sel del amur lel', see Andrew McGuinness and P. D. A. Harvey, *A Guide to British Medieval Seals* (London, 1996), pp. pp. 58-59 and pp. 89-90.

way to the ideas of 'public' and 'private' conceived in modern terms. Most of the seals which are known, including those with mottoes such as 'frange lege tege', survive because they are attached to deeds.¹⁹ Clearly then, the 'privy' seal does not demarcate an area of intimacy, or distinguish the official from the personal arena in the modern sense. Rather, the smaller seal is used to close letters written by an individual as a 'private citizen', as distinct from those written in more official capacity, as a magnate or officer of the crown. In the royal context too, the signet appears only fleetingly, if ever, to have functioned as a genuinely private instrument. According to Tout, by the end of the reign of Richard II the signet had followed the same path as the privy seal, becoming established as part of public royal bureaucracy.²⁰ In his view all acts performed by the monarch after 1399 were essentially official character:

The very ring which the king wore on his finger, the personal letter which he wrote or dictated, could not be regarded as the act of a private person.²¹

Like Tout, Galbraith understands the signet as a symbol which only briefly, if ever, distinguished the private identity of the monarch from his public persona. In his view, however, a different practice developed in this period to distinguish official letters from more personal missives. This was the sign manual, the autograph signature of the monarch, first used in the reign of Edward III:

The final device of the sovereign to express his most personal wish was the use of the sign manual, the autograph addition of his name or initials to documents of state ... The sign manual is, in fact, intended not so much to validate the document as to express by a personal touch the intimate will of the prince.²²

¹⁹Harvey and McGuiness, *Guide to British Medieval Seals*; J. Alexander and P. Binski, eds., *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England* (London, 1984), pp. 274-77. See also Roger H. Ellis, *Catalogue of Seals in the Public Record Office: Personal Seals Volume 1* (London, 1978), passim.

²⁰This impression seems fully supported by the fragments of documentary evidence which survive for the first part of our period. Henry IV appears to have written letters to his children under his signet, but this seal was also used to close letters to his Privy Council. The majority of Henry V's signet letters are departmental instruments for the issue of letters under major seals, and letters close directed to officers such as the governors of London, rather than what we would consider to be 'private' letters in the modern sense. John H. Fisher, Malcolm Richardson and Jane L. Fisher, eds., *An Anthology of Chancery English* (Knoxville, 1984); J. L. Kirby, ed., *Calendar of Signet Letters of Henry IV and Henry V (1399-1422)* (London, 1978).

²¹Tout, *Chapters in Administrative History*:V, pp. 226-29 at p. 229. It is possible that a 'finger signet' was emerging in this period, but evidence for this is uncertain. Hilary Jenkinson, *Guide to the Seals in the Public Record Office* (London, 1934), p. 8.

²²V. H. Galbraith, 'The Literacy of the English Kings', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 21 (1935):201-38 at p. 223.

Two other fragments of evidence suggest that in this period personal writing might have betokened not just intimate will, but intimacy 'proper'. First, David Ganz has shown that an idea of the autograph was in active use in letters of the High Middle Ages as a symbol of affection. Thus Bernard of Clairvaux closed a dictated letter with an autograph postscript, reading 'I dictated these things but wanted you to recognize my love by a handwriting known to you'.²³ Second, and somewhat closer to our period, are the instructions offered to a Parisian wife by her husband in the fourteenth century. In the prescriptive text, *Le Menagier de Paris*, the narrator urges his wife to write her letters to him in her own hand. This advice, it is claimed, is based on practices current at the French court:

Et est a noter sur ce, sicomme j'ay oy dire, que puis que les roynes de France sont mariees, elles ne lisent jamais seules lettres closes se elles ne sont escriptes de la propre main de leur mary ... et dient souvent qu'elles ne scevent mye bien lire autre lettre ou escripture que de leur mary. Et leur vient de bonne doctrine et de tresgrant bien, pour oster seulement les paroles et suppeçon ...²⁴

In the fourteenth century kings certainly did use their own hands; this was not simply confined to the sign manual. Indeed, the first example of use of the royal hand is found in the body of a letters, rather than in the signature. In 1330 Edward III wrote as follows to the pope:

sur ce sumes infourmes par mons' Guilliam de Mountagu quil plerroit a vous avoir de nous aucoun prive entresigne par quel vous puissez sentir quelles prieres nous sunt chargeantes et tendrement a cuer, et les quelles ne mie supplions ... que les prieres quelles nous vous ferrons en temps aventis ... quelles seyent escrites cestes paroles de nostre mein 'Pater sancte', vous pleise a avoir especialment recomandees ...²⁵

Here the autograph is a code, a 'prive entresigne'. Its function is not to convey warmth or intimacy, but to indicate the 'authentic' will of the sovereign in the narrow sense of the term. The examples in which Henry V's hand can be identified seem to confirm the impression that the autograph was a bureaucratic device, rather than a means of distinguishing official from

²³David Ganz, 'Mind in Character': Ancient and Medieval ideas about the status of the autograph as an expression of personality' in P. R. Robinson, and Rivkah Zim, eds., *Of the Making of Books: Medieval Manuscripts, their Scribes and Readers. Essays presented to M. B. Parkes* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 280-299 at p. 284.

²⁴G. E. Brereton and J.M. Ferrier, eds., *Le Menagier de Paris* (Oxford, 1981), p. 56.

²⁵Pierre Chaplais, *English Medieval Diplomatic Practice*, 2 vols. (London, 1975-82):I, No. 18, p. 21.

intimate documents. For example, in a letter from Henry to John Tiptoft, outlining the negotiations for a peace treaty with the Duke of Bourbon, the practical reasons for the use of the hand are clearly stated:

And, for þe secreness of þis matere, I have writen þis instruccion' [wyth myn owne] hande, and seled hit with my signet of þ'e gle, þe xxv day of ja[nuar, that is the] day of Conversion of seint Poole.²⁶

Examples of autograph subscriptions in the letters of Henry IV serve a slightly different purpose. In 1408 Henry IV wrote gratefully to his Chancellor:

I thank you herte[ly] of the grete business that ye do for me and for m[y r]jeume and trust pleyn[ly] in your good concil and hopynge to God to spek to yow hastely and thank yow with good herte.²⁷

A year later he acknowledged a handwritten letter from the same servant with an autograph subscription 'I thonk þe wryter of zowre lettre and byd God zyve hym good lyff and long vostre H. R.'²⁸ These examples, though on one level functioning as a simple guarantee of authenticity, or a way of communicating 'intimate will', seem rather closer to the practices described by Ganz in relation to twelfth-century writers.

What then of the family context? No original letters from an English king to their queens appear to have survived for this period.²⁹ It is therefore difficult to judge the accuracy of the *Ménagier* as a witness to contemporary practices. However, a small body of letters between other family members has survived. It has been suggested that some of these may be autograph; W. J. Hardy suggests that two letters addressed by Henry, Prince of Wales to his father are written in his own hand. This identification does not seem entirely safe, however.³⁰ Not only is the hand of these letters very different to that proved to belong to

²⁶Ibid., pp. 100-01. The need for secrecy can also be readily inferred as the reason for the use of the hand in the other surviving example from the reign of Henry V, a note concerning the safekeeping of the Duke of Orleans, written in response to news of a plan to liberate him. Henry Ellis, ed., *Original Letters Illustrative of English History*, 10 vols. in 3 series (London, 1824-46), 1:I, No. 1, pp. 1-3. For further examples see J. Otway-Ruthven, *The King's Secretary and the Signet Office in the XVth Century* (Cambridge, 1939), pp. 28-29 and 63.

²⁷Kirby, ed., *Calendar of Signet Letters*, No. 717, p. 148.

²⁸Ibid., No. 947, pp. 193-94 at p. 194.

²⁹A copy of a letter from Edward the Black Prince to his wife is preserved in the Anonimale Chronicle. V. H. Galbraith, ed., *The Anonimale Chronicle 1333 to 1381* (Manchester and New York, 1970), p. 171. PRO, SC1/42/33 is described in the calendar as a letter from Edward III to his queen. However, the document in question appears to be some kind of departmental instrument; it is not addressed to the queen.

³⁰W. J. Hardy, *The Handwriting of Kings and Queens of England* (London, 1893), pp. 19-23.

Henry V in his maturity, but they appear to differ from one another.³¹ Though all English kings after Edward III appear to have been able to write, not one of the 'family' letters which survive in the original seems to be wholly autograph, in the manner prescribed by the *Ménagier de Paris*.³² No writers draw attention to the writing, or add a subscription in a separate hand, as was the practice amongst the contemporaries of Bernard of Clairvaux. Indeed, many letters exchanged by family members in this period even lack an autograph signature. For example, a series of letters in the Cottonian manuscripts, sent by John, Duke of Lancaster to his father Henry IV and to his brother prince Henry, are signed by the same professional hand as that seen in the body of the text.³³ The same pattern can be seen in other letters seen in the Cottonian collection, and also in those preserved in the Public Records.³⁴ From this fragmentary evidence, it does not seem as though the autograph was used as it is in modern letters, to denote intimacy between parents and children or husbands and wives.

ii. Language

From the surviving fragments, no clear evidence emerges that materiality was used to mark a distinction between private and official letters. The evidence of language-use in letters is, however, considerably more abundant than that for material practices. To what extent do distinctions between letters written to different addressees emerge on the linguistic level? Our first impression of letters exchanged between members of the royal family in this period is of a certain formal courtesy, but also an intimacy and affection like that found in modern family letters. For example, Henry IV greets his eldest son, the future Henry V 'de tresentier cuer ove la benisoun de Dieu'.³⁵ His daughter is greeted 'Treschier et tresamee fille' and is

³¹Ibid., pp. 20-23. See an image of Henry V's autograph in *ACE*, Plate V. The signature of the later letter is in a hand different both to that of the first letter and to the body of the second, suggesting that the signature of the second letter is the only autograph aspect of either of these missives. One of these letters, PRO, SC1/43/193, is actually described in by the calendar of Ancient Correspondence as the work not of Henry, but his brother, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. Yet even if it is an autograph by this writer, no explicit reference is made to the fact, as in the subscriptions of Henry IV.

³²Galbraith, 'The Literacy of the Medieval English Kings', p. 25.

³³BL, MS Cotton Vespasian F. VII, ff. 78, 80, 97, 110, 112, 138.

³⁴BL, MS Cotton Vespasian F. III, ff. 6, 98; PRO, SC1/43/158, SC1/43/160.

³⁵M. Dominica Legge, ed., *Anglo-Norman Letters and Petitions from All Souls MS. 182*, Anglo-Norman Text Society 3 (1941), No. 216, pp. 286-7 at p. 286.

courteously entreated to take a certain matter ‘tendrement a cuer pour amour de nous’.³⁶ In return, similarly affectionate language is offered by the royal offspring to their parents. Prince Humphrey recommends himself to Queen Joan ‘tant affectueusement ... come je say ou en ascun manere plus puisse’.³⁷ His brother writes repeatedly to request news of his father’s welfare, assuring him that good tidings will always be received ‘de tresgrand joye de moun coer’.³⁸ On the death of his governor in 1402, Prince Henry takes the opportunity to thank his father particularly ‘de toutz les bones et gracieuses seignuries, queux il vous a pleu a moy toutdis faire et moustrer, et de grande tendresse quel vous avéz eeu de mon petit estat’.³⁹

Examples of affective terminology are also to be found in the handful of letters exchanged by members of noble families which survive for the same period. In one of the earliest English letters, written in 1399 Joan Pelham addresses her husband ‘my dear Lord, dearest and best beloved of all earthly Lords’, and recommends herself ‘with heart and body and all my poor might’.⁴⁰ In the same year Alice, countess of Kent began a letter to her adult son ‘Honoré et tresentierment de tout moun cuer tresamé filz, je vous salue tressouvent de cuer ove la benison de Dieu et la moien’.⁴¹ In 1397 Robert Lovell wrote his mother-in-law, Dame Alice de Bryene, a letter which closely resembles that of Prince Henry to his father in its emotional rhetoric. Like the prince, Lovell expressed himself eager to hear news of the health and welfare of his parent:

Jeo moi recomanc a vous si tresentierement come ieo say & plus puisse en desirant souerainement doier & vraiment sauoir bones & ioieuses nouvelles de vous ... come mon coer tresentierement le desire qar certes ma ioie est renouelle quant ieo en ay bones nouvelles de vous...⁴²

³⁶Ibid., No. 371, pp. 432-33 at p. 432.

³⁷Ibid., No. 350, pp. 413-14 at p. 413.

³⁸Ibid., No. 249, pp. 313-14 at p. 314. See also No. 246, p. 311.

³⁹Ibid., No. 247, p. 312-13 at p. 312..

⁴⁰Laetita Lyell, ed., *A Medieval Postbag* (London, 1934), No. 93, pp. 267-68 at p. 267.

⁴¹Legge., ed., *Anglo-Norman Letters*, No. 201, p. 274.

⁴²Edith Rickert, ‘A Leaf from a Fourteenth-Century Letter Book’, *Modern Philology* 25 (1927-28): 249-55 at p. 253.

The expressions of filial gratitude found in this letter also closely echo those found in the royal context in their emphasis on 'tenderness' and 'kindness':

vous esmerçant & remerçant en quantqe ieo puisse de lez tresgrandes tendresce & chierte qe vous auetz ew & vnquore auetz de ma persone & des aultres ennumerables bontez queux vous ad pluz de vostre treshaulte gentillesse moi faire ...⁴³

In the modern epistolary context, references to concepts such as love, kindness or tenderness would be interpreted as a signalling intimacy or familiarity between writer and addressee. Indeed, Lovell's letter, which survives in a fragment from a fourteenth-century letter-book, has been described as 'particularly charming in its strong expression of gratitude and love'.⁴⁴ However, if we consider a broader range of texts it soon becomes apparent that the 'language of the heart' is not particular to exchanges between close kin. In 1407, for example, Prince John wrote to the Privy Council 'mes treschiers et tresentierement bien amez, je vous salue tressovent foitz et de tout mon cuer.'⁴⁵ While still Prince of Wales, Henry asked a Baron to grant a benefice to his chaplain:

vous prions treschierement de nostre entier cuer que, pur amour de nous et par consideracioun de ceste nostre priere ... si vous le puisséz bonement faire sauvant vostre estat ...⁴⁶

Though these writers were unrelated, this rhetoric differs little from which Henry IV used to his daughter, requesting her to take a request 'tendrement a cuer pour amour de nous'. To take another example, in the final decade of the century an anonymous correspondent wrote to as follows to a bishop, to whom he was apparently unrelated:

Et, reverent pere, je vous mercie si entierement de cuer come je plus puisse del tresgrande amysté et entiere bien veillance que vous m'avéz fait et moustré sovent avant ces heures, et nomement de la grande tendresse que vous avéz de ce que moy touche ...⁴⁷

⁴³Ibid., p. 254.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 253.

⁴⁵F. C. Hingeston, ed., *Royal and Historical Letters during the Reign of Henry the Fourth*, 2 vols. (London, 1860-65; reprint with corrections, 1964-65):II, No. CCXXXII, p. 228 [BL, MS Cotton Vespasian F. VII, f. 107].

⁴⁶Legge, ed., *Anglo-Norman Letters*, No. 229, pp. 295. In the same year he wrote to a knight in similar terms 'Cestes choses ne vuiller lesser pur l'amour de nous et come fions tresentierement de vous.' Legge, ed., *Anglo-Norman Letters*, No. 230, p. 296.

⁴⁷Ibid., No. 139, pp. 202-03 at p. 203.

Again, this closely resembles rhetoric used between family members. Thus in 1415 Queen Joan writes to John Duke of Bedford asking for patronage for her attorney general:

vous empriant de tresentier cuer qentendue le tenue de mesme la supplicacion vous luy veuillez faire vostre bone & gracieuse seigneurie pur amour de nous.⁴⁸

In the letters of the aristocracy too, the 'language of the heart' is widely diffused, and seems to mark no clear division between family and strangers. In the Stonor collection, for example, Eleanor le Despenser asks Edmund de Stonor to perform a service for her 'pour amour de nous'⁴⁹. Henry Dounham, his feoffee, writes fulsomely:

vous enmericant ovesqe tres *tout mon coer* dez grauntes bien faitz et naturesses quex vous mauez endurrez devaunt ces hures, dount voz *treschers* merciez, desirant tout dys *affectuellement* bones nouvelles de vous oier et de vostre estate et de ma trehonore amie vostre compaigne et dez toutes vostres enfantz.⁵⁰

The only close kinsman in the collection, Waryn del Isle, asks Stonor to greet 'ma tresame soer, vostre compaigne, et voz enfaunz' but he uses no distinctively affective expressions to his brother-in-law.⁵¹ The same phenomenon occurs in the Pelham letters. Here it is Sir John Cheyne, a gentle peer, who recommends himself to Sir John Pelham 'with all mine whole heart, thanking you of the great kindnesses and gentillesses that ye have showed me ere this time'.⁵² Sir John's son opens his letter with simple humility:

I recommend me to you as lowly as I can or may, ever desiring to hear of your good health and welfare, praying God that ever it may increase at your desire.⁵³

In Thomas Sampson's formulary letters too, references to love, the heart and tenderness, are just as likely to occur in letters between non-relatives as in those exchanged by family members. Thus a parent opens a letter to his son's teacher 'Honours, amours et servises volontiers', an abbot thanks a bishop for 'la grande perfeccione d'amour qe moy moustrastes de vostre tres plenteuouse grace' while a merchant asks a contemporary to

⁴⁸BL, MS Cotton Vespasian F. III, f. 6.

⁴⁹SL, No. 3, p. 91.

⁵⁰SL, No 28, pp.107-108, at p. 108.

⁵¹SL, No. 17, p. 99-100.

⁵²Lyell, ed., *Medieval Postbag*, No. 95, pp. 271.

⁵³Ibid., No. 96, p. 272.

perform a service 'pour amour de moy'.⁵⁴

This example brings us to a second striking feature of letters exchanged by family members at this time. Not only is 'affective' language found in apparently 'public' letters, but references to the status of the addressee, which we might expect to signal formal relations, are just as likely to be encountered in family letters in this period as they are in other kinds of correspondence. In the royal context this is particularly clear. In 1402, for example, Prince Henry presented himself to his father not as a son, but as a servant:

In all wyse my sovereyne lorde I recomandde me to youre moste noble grace wyghte alle the lowlinesse that any subgit kan thenkke or devise.⁵⁵

The letter is signed 'Youre humble subgit and trwe ligeman'.⁵⁶ Other writers do refer to their relationship to the addressee, but the emphasis often remains on the social dignity or position of the writers. Henry begins a letter to Queen Katherine of Castile 'Tresexcellent Princesse, *nostre tresamee soere*', but in the body of the letter he refers meticulously to 'vostre treshonourable presence' and to her son as 'treshaut *Prince* .. vostre filz, le Roy de Castile'.⁵⁷ The same phenomenon is also found in the letters of the aristocracy. Though she refers to her husband at one point as 'my dear', Joan Pelham generally adheres to more deferential formulae, requesting politely, for example 'if it like to your Lordship that as soon as ye might, that I might hear of your gracious speed'.⁵⁸ Her son follows the same pattern 'beseeching' his father 'of your good Lordship that ye would vouchesafe.. to send .. as touching another horse'.⁵⁹ Though Waryn del Isle refers to his brother-in-law simply as 'tresame frere',⁶⁰ an unknown correspondent from the reign of Richard II addresses his

⁵⁴H. G. Richardson, ed., 'Letters of the Oxford Dictatores', in H. E. Salter, W. A. Pantin and H. G. Richardson, eds, *Formularies which bear on the History of Oxford*, 2 vols. Oxford Historical Society n.s. 4-5 (1942):II, pp. 329-450 at pp. 362, 387; BL, MS Harleian 3988, f. 44r.

⁵⁵Hardy, *Handwriting of Kings and Queens*, p. 19.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 23. Joanna, Countess of Westmoreland, writing to her brother Henry IV in 1406 also elides kinship entirely into status. She salutes Henry as 'high and puissant prince, and most excellent sovereign lord' and concludes 'Your most humble and obedient subject, if it please you'. M. A. E. Wood, ed., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies of Great Britain*, 3 vols. (London, 1846):I, No. XXXII, pp. 82-85 at p. 83 [Original in Anglo-Norman].

⁵⁷Hingeston, ed., *Royal and Historical Letters*:II, No. CCXLIX, p. 297.

⁵⁸Lyell, ed., *Medieval Postbag*, No. 93, pp. 267-68.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, No. 96, pp. 272-73.

brother 'Treshonore sire'.⁶¹ In the formulary letters of Thomas Sampson, children repeatedly refer to their parents and siblings as 'Tresreverent *dame* et miere' or 'Treshonore *sire*'.⁶²

It has sometimes been suggested that salutations are the most formulaic part of letters; they are the parts of the text most likely to reflect literary doctrine rather than social values. However, the emphasis on apparently 'public' values are seen just as clearly in body of these letters, in their rhetorical contents. For example, when Philippa, Queen of Portugal wrote to ask a favour of Henry IV in 1405, her request appealed neither to his love, nor to his role as a brother, but rather to his honour as a seigneur: 'si vous supplie pur tant, *tresnoble Prince*, si entierement come je say plus, que vous li plese quiter la dite some'.⁶³ In the following year her sister Joanna, Countess of Westmoreland, wrote to her brother the king asking that he help a lady whose marriage she had sponsored. She too places the emphasis not on the blood but on the obligations inherent in lordship:

May it please you to be gracious lord to her and her said husband ... that their affiance may turn to good effect for them, and to my honour, if it please you, by their finding succour from your royal and most excellent nobility, on account of this, my most effectual supplication.⁶⁴

Though he had asked so warmly after his mother-in-law's health, Robert observed correct social decorum in his humble proffer of services:

Et sascune chose soit pardeuers moy qe faire puisse a honour & pleisaunce de vous vous pleise moy comander voz graciuses voilloirs & pleisiers les queux ieo suy & toutdiz serra prest dobeir & dacomplier a tout mon petit poair.⁶⁵

In one of Sampson's formulary examples a son offers not love and affection to his father, but the social virtues of honour and loyalty:

Et pur ceo q'en temps de vacacion doctrine serra poy et lez expensez excessivez, vostre honorable paternite, la quel je fu tenuz, apres Dieu, sur toutez honorer, si bien humblement come devotement je supplie q'a moi un

⁶⁰SL, No. 19, p. 101.

⁶¹PRO, SC1/43/87.

⁶²Richardson, ed., 'Letters of the Oxford Dictatores', pp. 372, 374-77, 387, 390-91, 401 inter alia.

⁶³Hingeston, ed., *Royal and Historical Letters*:II, No. CXCIII, pp. 99-102 at p. 101.

⁶⁴Wood, ed., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies*:I, No. XXXII, pp. 82-85 at pp. 84-85 [BL, MS Cotton Vespasian F. XIII, f. 32: Original in Anglo-Norman].

⁶⁵Rickert, 'Fourteenth-Century Letter-Book', p. 254.

chivalle selle...qu'envoyer vous veuillez...⁶⁶

As we discussed earlier, the final area in which we see distinctions in modern letters between 'familiar' and formal or business letters is style. In the past critics have sometimes drawn attention to what they see as an artificial formality in late medieval letters. As with lexis and rhetoric, however, to be valid, such judgements must be based on a rigorous examination of the relationship between the style of letters and that of documents produced in more demonstrably 'public' or 'official' fora. Petitions directed to the king, as documents exchanged between strangers in an overtly legal context, form perhaps the most satisfactory source of evidence of the latter style. The following example, part of a petition from William Sandeye to Henry IV, clearly illustrates the main features of writing found in such contexts:

que le dit suppliant ne voule ne desire que par vertue d'iceste grace ascun aultre occupiant *benefice* ou *dignité* serroit ousté d'icelle, et sur ceo de vostre habundante grace especial grantier que le dit suppliant pourra les avantdites graces *poursuer* et *executer* selonc l'effect des dites bulles de *benefice* tantsoulement voidant après voz tresgracious *grant* et *licence* sanz riens pour ent estre empeschable...⁶⁷

In this passage two characteristics predominate. The first is elaboration - the tendency for both verbs and nouns to be organised into pairs or triplets of 'mutually defining near synonyms'.⁶⁸ In the verbal category, for example, we find 'voule ne desire', 'poursuer et executer', on the nominal level 'occupiant, *benefice* ou *dignité*', 'grant et licence'. The second feature of this style is an emphasis on coherence. Repetition and the frequent use of demonstratives ensures that elements of the discussion are constantly clarified. Thus we are twice reminded of continuity in the persona of the petitioner, 'le dit suppliant', and the identity of the 'bulles' and the 'graces', with those mentioned earlier in the petition.

As in the other categories of analysis, the family relationships which are least distinguished stylistically from those between non-kin, are those of the royal family. In the course of Glyndŵr's rebellion, Prince Henry wrote a letter to his father which closes with the following elaborate sentence:

⁶⁶Richardson, ed., 'Letters of the Oxford Dictatores', p. 420.

⁶⁷Legge, ed., *Anglo-Norman Letters*, No. XXII, pp. 22-23 at p. 23.

⁶⁸J.D. Burnley, 'Curial Prose in England', *Speculum* 63 (1986): 593-614, p. 596.

come ce que nous semble outre besoignable a estre *fait et ordeigné* pur *l'establisement et governance* de les parties susdites ... vous plese adjouster benigne audience, ferme *foy et créance*, et moy commander touchant ce et autres queconques voz *voloirs et plesirs*, as queux parfournir *je sui, et serraye*, toutdis *prest et apparaillez* a tout mon petit pouoir etc.⁶⁹

During the same uprising Henry IV wrote to his eldest son in equally curial fashion:

si volons nous que pur doner a nostre dit cousin le meillour *courage et voluntee* pur *bien et diligement* excercer son dite office, vous lui signifiéz par voz lettres que vous estez biens contens q'il y face son dite office...⁷⁰

The style of the father and son, writing to one another, also differs little from that of letters which each wrote to non-relatives. Around 1412, for example, Henry IV sent a warrant to his Chancellor for a licence of non-residence for one Nichol Mockyng:

qu'il puisse *avoir et enjoier* peisiblement la dite prebende avec les *proufitz et emolumentz* comme il ad eu devant ces heures jusques a la feste de Pasque prochein a venir, sanz estre compelléz de faire residence en la dite prebende, et éons outre a luy *donéz et grantéz* licence de permuter la dite prebende ...⁷¹

The same features, characteristic of 'legal' or 'curial' style can also be found in some of the family correspondence of the aristocracy. Perhaps the most dramatic example of the use of lexical doublets and triplets is found in a letter to which we referred earlier, from Robert Lovell to his mother-in-law, Dame Alice de Bryene. After thanking Dame Alice for her goodness towards him, for example, Lovell continues:

Et sascune chose soit pardeuers moy qe faire puisse a *honour & pleisaunce* de vous vous pleise moy comander voz graciuses *voilloirs & pleisiers* lez queux ieo *suy & toutdiz serra prest dobeir & daccomplir* a tout mon petit poair come jeo *suy tressouereignement temuz & obligez*...⁷²

Stylistically, Alice, Countess of Kent's letters emphasize the second feature, coherence, more than the elaboration of which Robert Lovell was so fond. In this respect, however, little distinction is apparent between the letters written to her son, Thomas, and that which she sent to the W.H., her auditor. To the former she recommends the service of a certain Baldewyn:

⁶⁹Legge, ed., *Anglo-Norman Letters*, No. 246, p. 311.

⁷⁰Ibid., No. 237, pp. 302-04 at p. 303.

⁷¹Ibid., No. 363, pp. 426-27 at p. 426.

⁷²Rickert, 'Fourteenth-Century Letter Book', p. 255.

il soy agré bien d'estre attendant vostre service par deux ans sanz plus prendre de vous par celle temps, et si que a la temps q'il commencera son dit service quant les ditz deux ans sont passéz il pense avoir de vous vint marcz au mielx pur son fee .. vuilléz, treschier filz, estre aviséz du profre du dit Baldewyn...⁷³

To the latter she writes:

vous mandons en priantz que vous vous ordeignéz d'oier les accomptz del dit sire H. come nostre auditour, auxi bien pur nostre temps comme pur le temps de Monseignur avantdit ... fesantz a dit sire H. *droit et raison* sur son accompte selonc ce que l'ordre d'accomptez demande, eiantz *ferme et fiable* ce que vous ferréz en nostre nom touchantz les ditz accomptz...⁷⁴

Some aristocrats write to relatives in elaborate style. Others - and if Sampson's formulary evidence is taken into account, a greater number - write in much simpler fashion. In 1396, for example, John Devereux wrote as follows to his wife:

Et quant de moy a la faisauce dicestes iestoy en bon point loiez en soit dieux
Et endroit des nouvelles pardecea grant ordignance est faite a Caleys encontre
la venue du Roy de France mais homme ne sciet vnqore pour certen sil vendra
a Caleys ou noun...⁷⁵

In this same period, however, letters exchanged by non-relatives can be equally straightforward in style. The earliest English letter in the Stonor Collection, from 1420, begins as follows:

Syr, as touchant þe ffynes þat ze sende to me syr [?], I knowe ham nozht what þay be, what is I-payd ne what is to payng, but I have aspyd among ham yn presence of Thomas, your messengyr, [who] can enfourme you...⁷⁶

A letter from a university master to a knight, found in one of Sampson's formularies, begins as follows:

Tres honore sire. Porce qe j'ay entendu qe vous avex tiel offys voide et j'ay un escoler qi tendrement ayme al coer et qi desire grandement qe purreit avoir mesme l'offyce, si vous empy, trehonore sire, q'a cause d'yceste ma priere luy voilliez granter le dit offys...⁷⁷

⁷³Legge, ed., *Anglo-Norman Letters*, No. 186, pp. 260-61 at p. 261.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, No. 195, p. 268.

⁷⁵Rickert, 'Fourteenth-Century Letter-Book', p. 254.

⁷⁶*SL*, No. 42, pp. 119-20 at p. 120. The letter is written from a bailiff to another officer of Thomas Stonor.

⁷⁷Richardson, 'Letters of the Oxford Dictatores', pp. 400-01.

Clearly the absence of elaboration cannot be read as a sign of familiarity, as it might be in modern letters.

iii. Conclusion

The different elements of epistolary discourse at the close of the fourteenth century and the opening of the fifteenth all seem to point to the same conclusion: letters between family members are not sharply distinguished from those exchanged by unrelated epistolary partners. The autograph does not yet appear to be used as an instrument of familiarity; as yet it is confined to the functions of confidentiality and authenticity. In language, too the category of familiarity seems to have little substance in the letters of this period. Both physically and verbally the semiotics of early fifteenth-century correspondence are organised around status concepts, not those of personal relationships.

Later Fifteenth-Century Letters

i. Material Practices

When we get to the mid-fifteenth century, a greater number of letters survive in the original. With the exception of the Armbrugh papers, which survive as part of a roll of legal evidence, and the Plumpton correspondence, which has been preserved in the copy of a seventeenth century antiquarian, the majority of the letters from this period are drafts or original texts which were actually sent; a great deal of evidence survives for this period for writing-practices.⁷⁸ Information concerning seals remains comparatively thin, however. Not only were seals broken when recipients opened letters, but because their status as a guarantee of authenticity ended with reception, there was little reason for seals to be preserved.⁷⁹ The practices which can be inferred from the material remains, whether of rings or fragmentary

⁷⁸Christine Carpenter, ed. *The Armbrugh Papers* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 54-59; Joan Kirby, ed., *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, Camden Society 5th series 8 (1996), pp. 18-21.

⁷⁹In contrast to legal documents, such as deeds, which were designed to be kept.

impressions, seems not to differ radically from those found at the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth century. As in the preceding period, the majority of individuals would probably have possessed only one seal; those who also owned a great seal would use it only to authenticate the most formal documents, such as letters patent. As in the preceding period too, design does not appear to function as means of distinguishing 'public' from private' either. Seals which seem, by their inscription or design, to have a 'private' function are often found attached to 'public' documents. For example, Nicholas Wyfold, grocer and alderman of London, used a seal depicting 'a flower growing out of heart' inscribed 'a Luy Dere Herte' to seal a deed in 1453.⁸⁰ Conversely, seals with emblems which seem to speak of 'public' values are used to close personal letters even to family members. Richard Cely sealed letters to his sons with a 'pseudo heraldic device', comparable to a coat of arms. Members of this family also drew representations of their merchant's marks on the outside panel of letters to each other.⁸¹

The situation concerning handwriting is both better documented and more suggestive of change. In the mid-fifteenth century autography continued to be a minority mode of writing, but its use had become more common, and the range of social meanings which it bore also seems to have multiplied. As before, the primary function of the personal hand was a means of authentication, as a way of ensuring that a piece of writing reflected the true will of the signatory. Now, however, this function seems no longer to be limited to the royal signature, but seems to apply both to the hand more generally. It is also now used by a wide range of writers. In 1465, for example, John Howard, Duke of Norfolk, instructed his servants:

I pray 3owe horden mony as faste as 3e kane, and delyver none to man bote I
send 3owe wrytenge wethe myn howen and [hand], selled wethe my [sel]
synete...⁸²

In merchant and gentry letter collections the hand is regularly used as a guarantee. Around 1477, for example, Sir William Stonor wrote to his rent-gatherer asking him to deliver money to the bearer of his letter 'and thys bylle wryte with my hond shalle be your dyicharge

⁸⁰Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Late Medieval London* (Ann Arbor, 1948), pp. 376 and 333.

⁸¹CL, p. x.

⁸²Anne Crawford, ed., *The Household Books of John Howard, Duke of Norfolk* (Stroud, 1992), p. 556.

[sic] of the sum reseuyd'.⁸³ In the same decade Robert Cely asked his brother George to deliver twelve pounds sterling to a certain William Easton, 'takyng a byll of ys honde to paye at London the sayd xij li. at a day as longe hafter ... as I toke the mony wp beffore.'⁸⁴

In the early fifteenth century the use of the hand as a tool of privacy, an idea which arises directly out of the idea of authentication, seemed to be restricted to the royal sphere. By the mid- fifteenth century this function too is found at all levels of society. In 1504, for example, Germayn Pole wrote as follows to his father-in-law, Sir Robert Plumpton:

Father the cause of my wrytyng unto of myn own hand, is for a matter that no man knoweth of but onely my wyfe, and I, and the partyes.⁸⁵

Autography could also be used in other ways to preserve confidentiality. In 1469 John Paston II famously sent an unsigned letter to his brother, arguing 'Ye knowe thys hande, perfore nedythe no mencion from whom it comythe'.⁸⁶ The autograph letters sent by Thomas Stonor to his brother Sir William under the pseudonym 'Th. Staunton' may have depended on a similar kind of recognition.⁸⁷

At a range of social levels the recognisable personal hand operated as a form of guarantee, and as means of achieving secrecy. Neither authenticity nor confidentiality are, however, directly equivalent to privacy; they are still more ambiguously related to the idea of intimacy. To what extent can a connection be established between autograph writing and affect in this period? Martin Camargo has argued that love letters in later medieval texts seem to assume 'a talismanic, metonymic quality', which is often associated with the physical contact symbolised by the hand. In *Blanchardyn and Eglantine*, for example, we are told that the hero 'drew hymself aside' to pen a letter to his beloved 'with his owne hande'. In the text

⁸³SL, No. 193, p. 289.

⁸⁴CL, No. 3, p. 4. So firmly established was the idea of using the hand as evidence of authentication, that it could be used to associate an individual with an action of which he might otherwise deny knowledge. For example, in the 1460s Margaret Stephen offered support to her grandson over a land dispute conducted against a certain John Elliott. Margaret asserted that the Elliott family had no claim to the land, for: 'Elyott his grandsire was my receyver long tyme and if hit had be his right he wold not receyve and accomptes make to myne avayle, þe whiche accomptis of þat yere y haue wrytyng of his hondis and y send youe at this tyme one of them to preve þe same ..'PRO, SC1/ 51/104. See also PL:I, No 227, pp. 379-80 at p. 379.

⁸⁵Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 194, p. 177.

⁸⁶PL:I, No. 244, pp. 407-08 at p. 407.

⁸⁷SL, Nos. 151 and 153, pp. 244-45 and 245-47.

of the letter, the idea of the hand is closely linked to that of intimacy:

And by cause ye shall gyue credence and feyth to this, myn owne hande wrytyng, I do now bringe to your remembrance that one onely kyssyng that I toke of yow, not ferre wythout youre cyte of Tourmaday...⁸⁸

A comparable association between the personal hand and the intimacy of the body is found in another fifteenth-century text, Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Realising that he has been mortally wounded, Sir Gawain decides to write one final letter to Sir Lancelot, begging his forgiveness for their quarrel: though physically weakened by his wound, Sir Gawain insists on writing the letter in his own hand. In the conclusion to the letter the significance of this action is underlined:

And the date of thys lettir was wrytten but two owrys and an halff afore my dethe, wrytten with myne owne honde and subscribed with parte of my harte blood.⁸⁹

In chapter one above we saw that the relationship between texts and practices in the later Middle Ages is a highly complex one; practices in art do not directly reflect those in life. Yet when we turn to the harder evidence of the letters themselves, we find some suggestion that these ideas were being put into practice. In both of the 'love' letters sent by John Paston III, to sound out the possibility of courtship, direct allusion is made to the use of the author's own 'lewd hand'.⁹⁰ The appearance of this expression is rendered all the more interesting by its omission from the most of his other letters, almost all of which are also autograph.. In historical letters, however, the connection between intimacy and the hand does not seem as straightforward as in our literary texts. In *Blanchardyn and Eglantyne*, and other texts which refer to the same practice, such as *The Merchant's Tale*, the purpose of selecting the autograph seems to be to exclude other parties from the intimate epistolary transaction.⁹¹ Paston, by contrast, seem deliberately to shun the opportunity for exclusive one-to-one communication:

my ryght trusty frend Rychard Stratton, berer her-of, to whom I besech yow to geue credence in syche maters as he shall on my behalue comon wyth yow of,

⁸⁸Leon Kellner, ed., *Caxton's Blanchardyn and Eglantine c.1489*, EETS e.s. 58 (1890), pp. 131 and 134.

⁸⁹E. Vinaver, ed., *Malory: Works*, one volume text of second edition (Oxford, 1971), Book XXI, p. 710.

⁹⁰*PL*:I, No. 373, pp. 603-04 at p. 604.

⁹¹Chaucer, *The Merchant's Tale*, ll. 1935-54, in L. D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford, 1988), p. 162.

if it lyke you to lyston hym [sic]...⁹²

Further, at the close of the same letter, the author suggests that his motives for the use of his own, identifiable hand, are more legal than romantic:

Her I send yow thys bylle wretyn wyth my lewd hand and sealyd wyth my sygnet to remayn wyth yow for a wyttnesse ayenst me, and to my shame and dyshonour if I contrary it.⁹³

The autograph operates here in a manner analogous to, or derivative of, the straightforward authenticating role which it played in other contexts. This seems quite different to the kind of physical, even visceral investment in the hand, which we saw in the Gawain episode.

Beyond this internal evidence, there may be one further reason for doubting that John Paston III's 'love letters' really exemplify the precepts outlined by the *Ménagier*. As we have discussed above, many features which we associate with 'courtly love' are drawn from the wider repertoire of service relations current in the period; John Paston III's autograph may be another example of this phenomenon. In fifteenth-century correspondence, considered as a whole, the context in which reference to writing is most commonly found is in letters from inferiors to their lords or masters. In 1479, for example, one H. Carnebull writes to Sir William Stonor 'with þe owne hande of hym þat is yours to my litle poer'.⁹⁴ In the 1480s the Cellarer of Newburgh closed a letter to Sir Robert Plumpton 'Written at Newburgh this day, by your owne beadman'.⁹⁵ In 1476 John Paston II himself ends a missive to Lord Hastings 'wyth the hand of your most humble seruaunt and beedman.'⁹⁶ In all these examples a link is implied between the autograph and the correspondent's status as a 'servant'; the use of the hand seems to be presented as a particular effort, symbolising the personal devotion of the writer to his lord. It seems possible that, rather than a modern idea of intimacy, it is this kind of meaning which the autograph bears in Paston's love letters.

⁹²PL:I, No. 373, pp. 603-04 at p. 604.

⁹³Ibid..

⁹⁴SL, No. 255, p. 350. See also in this collection Nos. 220-21, 230, 247, 256, 276, 282, 292, 309, 312, 321-22, 327, 330-32.

⁹⁵Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 61, p. 76. See also in this collection Nos. 61, 71, 110, 146, 151, 177, 178, 238.

⁹⁶PL:I, No. 370, p. 601.

The final evidence that the autograph was not understood as a tool of familiar intimacy, is the comparative absence of its use in marriage, the relationship with which the *Ménagier* was directly concerned. John Paston III penned the one surviving letter to his wife himself, but as we have seen, autography was his normal mode of composition.⁹⁷ His father John Paston I, who was a less fluent writer, penned only two of his eleven letters to his wife entirely himself.⁹⁸ More suggestive still of an absence of an idea of intimacy associated with the hand are the letters of wives. According to Veronica O'Mara few, if any, of the female-authored letters in the family collections are autographs. Though Alison Hanham has described Margery Cely's letter to her husband George as being in her own hand, O'Mara argues:

there is nothing in the fluent appearance of the letter 222, which is also responsible for the subscription, to suggest that it is attributable to a woman.⁹⁹

O'Mara notes that the two letters sent by Jane Stonor to her husband are in different hands; even if one of the letters is autograph, the other must be dictated.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps most interesting of all are the letters of Margery Paston and of the first and third wives of Sir William Stonor, Elizabeth and Anne. The first two writers signed the majority of their letters themselves, and sometimes appended autograph subscriptions of some length to dictated missives.¹⁰¹ The last signs her letter 'yovr new wyf anne Stonor' in what O'Mara characterises as 'a good clear hand'.¹⁰² Had communicating in the autograph been considered an important aspect of marital relations in this period, it seems likely that these writers would have striven to develop the limited competence which they already possessed.¹⁰³ Yet rather than this, apparently intimate letters, such as Margery Brews's

⁹⁷*PL:I*, No. 389, p. 628.

⁹⁸The letters to Margaret are *PL:I*, Nos. 55, 56, 58, 59, 71-77. The autograph letters are Nos. 73 and 74. Thomas Stonor's letter to Jane Stonor is probably autograph. Robert Plumpton's letters survive only as transcriptions; it is therefore impossible to be certain of their original mode of composition. There is no allusion to autography in the subscription of either. PRO, SC1/46/243; Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, Nos. 162 and 185, pp. 152 and 169-70.

⁹⁹V. M. O'Mara, 'Female Scribal Ability and Scribal Activity in Late Medieval England: The Evidence?', *Leeds Studies in English* n.s. 27 (1996): 87-110, p. 92.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, pp. 91-95; *PL:I*, Nos. 417-18, 420. See Plates 9-10.

¹⁰²O'Mara, 'Female Scribal Ability', p. 94.

¹⁰³As we argued in chapter one above, it seems likely that concerns about female propriety outweighed any

Valentines and 'Clare's' love letter to George Cely, are written entirely in the hands of scribes.¹⁰⁴

In the last quarter of the fifteenth century a certain shift in attitudes may, perhaps, be detected. One important change, evident in letters written in the 1490s, is the appearance of letters to family members written by women. At some time between 1497 and 1501, for example, Lora, countess of Ormonde wrote a letter to her husband 'crebyllyd with my poÿre hand'.¹⁰⁵ Unlike writers of gentry status, a writer of this kind is unlikely to have lacked secretarial assistance should she have wished for it; neither is there any suggestion in the text of the letter that the writer was bereft of such resources. The decision to write herself therefore seems significant. The same circumstances, and thus interpretation, applies to the two other women, both mothers, who wrote autograph letters in this period. Though the Plumpton letters survive only in a seventeenth-century copy, we can be certain that Edith, wife of Ralph, lord Nevill wrote to her daughter in her own hand, for she notes the fact, perhaps proudly, in the subscription.¹⁰⁶ In the two surviving letters from Margaret Beaufort to her son, Henry VII, no such allusion is found. However, sufficient letters from this writer survive not simply to identify the hand in these letters as her own, but to conclude that the choice of the autograph was unusual, and therefore 'marked'.¹⁰⁷ At the beginning of the following century Catherine of Aragon sent a long series of autograph letters to her father, King of Spain. Catherine is a second writer whose correspondence was generally dictated.¹⁰⁸

For male writers the change observable at the close of the century is more difficult to

desire for 'epistolary privacy' in this period.

¹⁰⁴ *PL*:I, Nos. 415 and 416, pp. 662-63. Both letters were written by the clerk Thomas Kela. *CL*, No. 54, pp. 49-50. See note on p. 262 'The letter may have been written by a professional letter-writer, judging from its rather ornate flourishes and the absence of a signature'.

¹⁰⁵ *PRO*, SC1/51/145. See Plate 11.

¹⁰⁶ Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 200, p. 182.

¹⁰⁷ *BL*, MS Cotton Vespasian F. XIII, f. 74. Non-autograph letters are described in *PL*:II, No. 847, p. 485; Wood, ed., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies*:I, No. XLVII, pp. 116-118.

¹⁰⁸ Wood, ed., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies*:I, Nos. LII, LIII, LVIII, *inter alia*. Non-autograph letters are given Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 1:I, Nos. XXXII, XXXIII. See also the sisters of Henry VIII, Mary and Margaret, who send autograph letters to their brother, discussed in chapter one above. These letters have been excluded from explicit discussion here, as they are later in date, and therefore fall into the period covered by the following chapter.

interpret. As we saw in chapter one, this period saw a growth in literacy, particularly among gentle and mercantile writers, and the increased number of autograph letters exchanged by kinsmen might perhaps be ascribed to this change.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, those who write to relatives in their own hands are usually those who compose all their letters themselves. We do find some fragments of qualitative evidence, however. Two correspondents at the turn of the century make statements which suggest that they saw writing in their own hand as a particular or intimate gesture. Around 1499 Germain Pole wrote to his father-in-law Sir Robert Plumpton:

And, Sir, I lowly pray yow & my lady my mother to take this letter in gud parte, for it is wrytten hastyly with my own hand & without the vise of any other body; for I trow you had rather haue it of my own hand then of another bodyes.¹¹⁰

The mirror image of Margaret Beaufort's letters to Henry VII is the single surviving letter from the son to his mother. The letter is signed 'with the hande of youre most humble and lovyng sonne' and is followed by an apologetic postscript:

Madame I have encombred you now with thys my longe wrytings, but me thyngks [sic] that I can doo no less, considering that hit is so selden that I do wryte, wherfore I beseeche you to pardon me, for verrayly Madame my syghte is nothing so perfitt as it has ben; and I know well hit will appayre dayly; wherfore I trust that you will not be displesed though I wryte not so often with myne owne hand, for on my fayth I have ben three dayes or I colde make an ende of this Letter.¹¹¹

The mode of expression is somewhat rambling, but the burden of the message seems clear. Writing in his own hand is an arduous task, but one which the writer sees as a filial obligation. Autography is now presented as a symbol of emotional as well as a physical effort.

¹⁰⁹William Paston signed several letters to John Paston III 'wyth þe hand of your broder', but his letter to the bailiff of Mautby is also autograph. *PL:I*, Nos. 406, 409, 410 and 414. John Paston II wrote drafts of letters to nobles, accounts and memoranda himself, as well as letters to family members. *PL:I*, Nos. 249, 255, 314. In other cases the evidence is too fragmentary for us to determine general practice. In the case of the Marchall, Stonor and Cely families letters between family members are the only ones to survive. As we have noted, the Armbrugh and Plumpton collections have been preserved in the form of copies rather than originals.

¹¹⁰Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 138, p. 132.

¹¹¹Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 1:I, No. XXI, pp. 43-46 at pp. 45-46.

ii. Style

Material practices show a certain subtle shift in the later fifteenth century. To what extent does language follow this pattern? Does style continue to elide differences between family or strangers, or does a particular language of intimacy emerge in this period? As we have seen, noble correspondents writing in both English and Anglo-Norman French at the opening of the century communicated in elevated style. This practice does not appear to have varied greatly according to the identity of the addressee; familiars and strangers alike were the recipients of texts marked by the techniques of coherence and elaboration which also characterise legal documents of the period. A glance at the later collections shows that letters written to servants and strangers continued to be written in this mode in the later fifteenth century. Around 1431 for example Alice, lady Sudeley wrote to Thomas Stonor:

where as y of singler trust in you have before this enfeffed you with other in my Maners, londes and tenements withyn dyvers shires, *wole* and hertely *prey* you, for gret *consideracions* and *causes* touching my *worship* and gret *profyt*, that ye seale the deedes ...¹¹²

Some fifty years later The Earl of Oxford ordered John Paston III:

And for somoche as ye may nat be here with me at this tyme, I *desire* and *pray* you to *prepare* and *ordeyne* your-self with as many men in harneys as ye godely may, to do the Kyng seruice in my company at the Kynges *charges* and *costes* ...¹¹³

However, evidence for the following years, though somewhat thin for noble writers, suggests a relaxation of style in the letters exchanged by family members. Though Lora, countess of Ormonde addresses her husband quite formally, her prose is considerably less ornate than that quoted above:

My wery good lord in most hombyll wys y recomaund me to yowr good lordshyp as y that ham most bond to yower good lordshyp that het plesse yow to rembyr me to com to London that y may se yowre lordshyp and my fadyr ... wych schall be to my gret comfort and yn hoder maters that hyt pleshyt yow to wyrte [sic] to me ...¹¹⁴

Similar observations might be made of the letters sent by Richard de la Pole to his elder

¹¹²SL, No. 53, p. 135.

¹¹³PL:II, No. 819, p. 460.

¹¹⁴PRO, SC1/51/145.

brother Edmund, earl of Suffolk at the turn of the sixteenth century. Richard, who was being held to ransom, complained bitterly, but in quite simple style, to his brother:

Sir as for the mater thatt I sent yow worde ye sent me worde ye cowde do nothyng therin ... Sir I have put a wey all my ffolkys, and the brynger here of can shew you in what danger I am in. Sir be my trowth ye dele ffery hardly with me, I beyng your brother, in many thyngys. I know not what the menyng ys as God knowyth...¹¹⁵

Another example of 'informal' prose in a noble missive is found in a copy of a letter thought to have been sent by the Earl of Oxford to his wife in 1471:

Also ye shall send me in all hast all the redi money that ye can make, and asse moné of my men asse can com well horsyd, and that they cum in dyuerse parcellys. Also that my best horsse be sent, wyth my stele sadelles, and byd the yoman of the horse couer theym wyth leddy. ¹¹⁶

However, exploration of the broader context suggests that the situation may be more complicated than this simple juxtaposition of examples implies. First, a number of nobles writing in the same period continue to use a formal style, very close to that seen in Anglo-Norman letters, even when writing to close relatives. In some ways the putative letter from the Duke of Suffolk to his son, fortuitously preserved amongst the Paston letters, is an unusual text. Perhaps because of the strained circumstances in which it was composed this letter is more heavily influenced by religious vocabulary than was usual in the period. Nevertheless, the style which results remains recognisably akin to that of formal legal documents. In the opening paragraph the two styles are combined, resulting in a highly elevated diction:

My dere and only welbeloved sone ... as ferre as a fader may charge his child, I both *charge you, and prei you* to sette alle *spirites and wittes* to *do* and to *knowe* his holy *lawes and comaundments* by the which ye shall with his grete mercy passe alle the grete *tempests and troubles* of this wrecched world.¹¹⁷

In this example, the peculiar circumstances of the author might account for the selection of

¹¹⁵Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 3:I, pp. 129-130. Not only are the lexical duplications associated with curial prose style absent from these passages, but the second correspondent in particular eschews the opportunities for coherence inherent in his message. In the final sentence, for example, rather than the adverbial construction 'I know not the meaning thereof' he chooses the simpler, and less formal sounding, 'what the menyng ys'. Both writers also indulge in the repetition of both phrases and specific ('in what danger I am in'), which suggests a lack of concern to produce a sophisticated style.

¹¹⁶PL:II, No. 915, pp. 591-92 at 592.

¹¹⁷J. Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters*, 4 vols. (London, 1872-75):I, No. 91, pp. 121-2 at p. 121.

an elaborate style. Yet more routine letters display a style still more closely allied to that of legal documents. The two letters which the Earls of March and Rutland sent to their father, the Duke of York, contain a number of highly elaborated passages. One of letters contains the following commendation:

as lowely as with all oure herts as we youre *trewe and naturell* sonnes *can or may*, we recomaunde us un to your noble grace, humbly besechyng your *nobley & worthy* ffaderhode to yeve us your hertely blessing: thurgh which we trust muche the rather to encrees and growe to vertu, and to spede the bettur in all matiers and things that we *schall use, occupie, and exercise*.¹¹⁸

Another example is provided by the single surviving letter from Henry VII to his mother, which was mentioned earlier. He assures her, for example:

And my Dame, not onely in this but in all other thyngs that I may knowe should be to *youre honour and plesure and the weale* of your salle I shall be as glad to plesse you as youre herte can desire hit, and I knowe well that I am as much bounden so to doe as any creture lyvyng, for the *grete and singular* moderly *love and affection* that hit hath plesed you at all tymes to ber towards me.¹¹⁹

The same features are seen in the single surviving missive from Henry VI to Margaret of Anjou:

We therefore *desire and praye* yow that ye wol see that the said John may have delyverance of the said oks, after th'entent of oure *saide grante*.¹²⁰

Simple enumeration of examples does not itself demonstrate that the fifteenth century was a period of stasis; though they are in the minority, the Ormond and de la Pole letters might represent an innovative, and perhaps influential new attitude towards style. Yet at least one other interpretation is possible. As we saw earlier, Lora Butler's letter is unusual in the period as being 'crebyllyd with my poÿre hand'. The English letters of Richard de la Pole are also autograph, and circumstantial evidence points to the same mode of composition for the letter of the Earl of Oxford. Could it be that the 'informality' of these letters simply reflects the limitations of their writer's competence? Certain clues within the letters seem to point to this conclusion. For example, though Lora Ormond's writing is quite even, that of de la Pole is extremely messy, suggesting a lack of formal training. Similarly, in contrast

¹¹⁸Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 1:1, No. V, pp. 8-19 at p. 9.

¹¹⁹Ibid., No. XXI, pp. 43-6 at p. 44.

¹²⁰Cecil Monro, ed., *Letters of Queen Margaret of Anjou*, Camden Society o.s. 86 (1863), No. LXVI, p. 98. Though this text might perhaps be dismissed as a departmental instrument rather than a letter in the narrow sense.

to both Henry VII and the Duke of Suffolk, whose letters are also autograph, these writers show highly unorthodox spellings of common words. Lora Butler has 'wery' for 'very', 'pleshyt' for 'please it' and 'wyrte' for 'write'.¹²¹ The Earl not only writes 'asse moné' for 'as many' and 'seuer' for 'sure', but he uses a dialectal spelling 'qwhome', which would be surprising in the letter of a professional writer at this date.¹²²

Further support might be lent to his theory by the examination of the wider evidence of noble writing abilities. Though no other autograph letters from Richard de la Pole survive, we do have a number which his brother Edmund wrote in his own hand. These show much the same traits as those written by Richard - unorthodox spelling and badly formed letters. Though these letters are directed to servants, they too lack the stylistic tropes associated with the letters of the patrons of the Pastons, Stonors or Plumptons. The contrast between a letter from Suffolk to his steward Thomas Killingworth and the missive from the Earl of Oxford to John Paston III, quoted above, is clearly evident:

Tomas Kelengvort, I have reseved yovr letter, and also my schertes, and to cheerges, and a bonete, I thanke Clakes [sic] Bakker. I marvele yov sond me not my naggeletes, and my haste and bedes. I toked yov mone for yt, and thenke yov met vele send me that that I thake yov mone for; bovt I se vele ef I thake yov no mone yov vold make bovt letaile cheeufe for me.¹²³

In another chance survival discussed in chapter 1, the autograph letters of John Howard, duke of Norfolk, a similar coincidence of factors can be observed. Howard's orthography and hand are untrained, and though he often uses adverbial conjunctions and set phrases in his dictated letters, the overall style of his autograph drafts is much simpler.¹²⁴ A draft letter to the king, which might be expected to represent the most sophisticated end of the writer's abilities, reads:

Sere, it is so, sens I kame to 3ower sety of London thes laste weke I ade wethe me the konyngeste makere of schepes that I kovede gete, to that hentente in hal haste to make schwesc ij schepes as I promysed 3ower hynes I wolde do; and in the gohenge a bowte the same as I was komhenge howete of a kervel of myn to the bote it mesfortened me so to hurte my lege that I may noder ryde nor wel

¹²¹PRO, SC1/51/145.

¹²²PL:II, No. 915, pp. 591-92.

¹²³J. Gairdner, ed., *Letters and Papers of Richard III and Henry VII*, 2 vols. Rolls Series 24 (London, 1861-63):I, No. XXXII, p. 256.

¹²⁴See for example PL:II, No. 799.

goo; wer fore I beseche 3ower good grase to pardon me of myn not komhenge
at thes tyme...¹²⁵

Towards the end of the fifteenth century the letters of the nobility were more likely to be written in the hand of their signatory; one side effect was that the stylistic decorum of the preceding period was not always observed. Yet this development seems to mark not a revolution but merely a transitional stage in the history of style. Where writers have the ability to produce curial prose themselves, or where they use secretaries, elevated style continues to be used; as we shall see later, in the sixteenth century this continues to be the case. Thus in the second half of the fifteenth century no radical reorganisation of ideological boundaries seems to occur: as before, the style of noble letters is determined by the status of the writer rather than by his or her relationship to the addressee.

As we have seen, the evidence for the gentry in the early fifteenth century is much thinner than that for the nobility. To what degree does the more extensive evidence of the later century support the speculations advanced above? Those writers who have commented on the style of the gentry letter collections have described them as being simple or 'unconsidered'. This observation is often linked to a perception that these letters closely reflect the spoken language of the time. Matthews argues that in the absence of authoritative prose models, it is unsurprising to find that:

the phraseology and constructions of colloquial English are so close to the surface of the writing, that anecdotes abound, that dialogue is prevalent in matter that would now be treated wholly in the third person, and that much of it has the air of a simple conversation ...¹²⁶

Up to the middle of the twentieth century views of this kind were in the majority. More recently, however, some critics have accounted differently for the style of these letters. In his influential article 'Style and Stereotype in Early English Letters' Norman Davis analyses a number of constructions concluding:

It seems as certain as such things can be that grammatical forms of all these kinds are not colloquial in origin but developed in written use.¹²⁷

¹²⁵Crawford, ed., *Howard Household Books*, p. 173.

¹²⁶William Matthews, *Later Medieval English Prose* (New York, 1963), p. 11.

¹²⁷Norman Davis, 'Style and Stereotype in Early English Letters', *Leeds Studies in English* n.s. 1 (1967):7-17 at p. 9.

For Davis, the style of the letters does not represent the unconsidered adoption of oral forms, but rather a written style, albeit of a comparatively loose kind. Recently Diane Watt has gone further, suggesting that what we see in these letters is the result of stylistic choice:

an examination of the backgrounds of the main writers in the Paston family and the context of the correspondence will reveal that the letters of the Paston women, far from being parochial, were written in a style appropriate to their function as household correspondence.¹²⁸

For plain matters a plain style was viewed as the most appropriate mode of expression.

How much credibility can be assigned to the arguments of Davis and Watt? Is the style of these letters self-conscious, or merely a reflection of the comparatively mean abilities of their authors? In some cases the latter explanation is the more persuasive. It seems unlikely that writers of comparatively mean ability, such as Goddard Oxbrygge and Thomas Henham were able to make sophisticated decisions concerning style. The same is true of a number of writers in the Cely collection, whose letters suggest a lack of literary sophistication. In other cases, however, there does seem to be good reason to assume that simple style might reflect deliberate choice. Some critics have already commented on the courtly tone of some of John Paston III's letters. Equally striking, though less discussed, is the variety of styles found in the letters written by this correspondent's father, John Paston I. Though the letters which John sent to his wife are loosely constructed and generally rather plain in style, those directed to noble correspondents are both carefully wrought and elevated in diction. For example, he writes to the Earl of Oxford, concerning the plight of the wife of Thomas Denys:

Agnes Denyes, be the meanes of your lordshp and of my lord the Cardynall, hos sowle God *assoyle* and *forgeve*, was set in preson beyng with child; which, and the *sorough* and *shame* there-of, was nygh here deth, amd yet dayly is *vexed* and *trobled*, and here servauntes in like wyse, to the vttermest distruccion of here *person* and *godes*.¹²⁹

A similar contrast is evident in the letters of Richard Cely the elder. A characteristic sentence from his letters to his son is simple, direct, perhaps a little disorganised:

¹²⁸Diane Watt, "No Writing for Writing's Sake": The Language of Service and Household Rhetoric in the Letters of the Paston Women', in Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, eds., *Dear Sister. Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia, 1993), pp. 122-39 at pp. 123-24.

¹²⁹PL:I, No. 49, pp. 80-81.

I wyll Rychard Cely com home lette hym wat a fayar weder for Wyll Maryon was sore aferd for the grete myste and [as for d]ede at London ys no syche fere of syche thyng as youre moder wrote of but in the West Contre ys gret.¹³⁰

In a letter to an officer of the Lieutenant of the Staple, by contrast, techniques of amplification and coherence are prominent:

Y gretly marvayle that eny suche *synistre* or *wrong* suggestion shuld be *made* or *reported* of me vnto your *saide* mastership/ Wherfore Y call allmyghty God to *wittnes* and *record* þat Y never made report to any maner person of any suche or other vngodely language by you *sade* [sic] maystership nor any of yours...¹³¹

This particular letter was written by a scribe, whereas Richard's other letters, to his sons, are autograph. The majority of John Paston I's letters, whether sent to family or lords, were written by amanuenses. One might therefore argue that differences in style simply reflect differences in authorship.¹³² In other cases, however, changes in diction can be seen within letters, suggesting that whether or not a letter was penned by its signatory, style was a question of choice. For example, in the famous letter of 1465, in which John Paston I complained of the idleness of his eldest son, different styles are clearly to be seen. The letter begins with simply expressed requests:

As for my livelode, I left with Daubeney a bille of many of my dettes, wherby ye all myght haue be indused whedir ye shuld haue sent for siluer ...¹³³

However, when the question of household governance is raised, a shift can be observed:

Also, remembir yow in any *howsold*, *felaship*, or *company* þat will be of good rewle, purvyauns must be had þat euery person of it be *helpyng* and *fortheryng* aftir his *discrecion* and *powyre*, and he þat woll not do so without he be kept of almes shuld be put out of the *houshold* or *felachep*.¹³⁴

A similar contrast can be seen in a letter sent by Germain Pole to his father-in-law Sir Robert Plumpton at the turn of the century. The letter begins in grand style, with reception of the news of Sir Robert's elevation to the position of knight of the king's body:

¹³⁰CL, No. 38, pp. 34-35 at p. 34; [PRO, SC1/59/43 - modern punctuation has been removed].

¹³¹CL, No. 16, pp. 14-15. There is no address on this draft, but the addressee can be inferred from the contents.

¹³²Though in these cases the choice of a clerk may itself reflect the desire to writes a letter in an elevated style.

¹³³PL:I, No. 72, pp. 126-31, at p. 127.

¹³⁴Ibid., at pp. 127-28.

now, I doubt not but *with dew labor* mad unto þe kings grace, & *with the gud counsell* of your *lovers & frinds*, all the *vexation & troble* þat ye haue had now laytly for your matters, by the grace of þe blessed Trenity, shall turne vnto your *ioyfull comforth* and *harts ease*; considering how *falsly* & how *vnrighteously*, the size is past against you, contrary to the law, either of God or man.¹³⁵

The remainder of the letter, however, is considerably less ambitious. The sentence which follows this one reads simply:

Furthermore, Sir, I have bene at Combrige for your rent at your tenaunte, William Smith, and I receiued of him for one yeares rent xls, the which I send you by the brynger herof.¹³⁶

It seems clear that many writers in this period were capable of writing in a variety of styles. How convincing is Watt's explanation, that the Paston writers choose a simple style because their letters were 'household documents'? Indeed, could we go further, and see this 'plain style' as a means of expressing familiarity, like colloquial style in modern correspondence? In order for this hypothesis to hold true, two conditions would have to be met. First, it would have to be shown that letters exchanged by members of the 'familia' were consistently written in 'plain' style. Second, this style would have to be associated specifically with the letters of familiars, rather than with those of strangers or mere acquaintances. The first of these statements seems broadly to hold true in relation to family letters of the late fifteenth century. As we saw above, letters to family members do sometimes include passages in elevated style. However, this phenomenon, which in most cases relates only to particular passages, can usually be accounted for by the topic under discussion. It would seem that correspondents understood a more elaborate style as appropriate to subjects relating to religion, such as bereavement, and to the discussion of legal affairs, or of transactions ordinarily couched in legal language. John Paston I's discussion of the proper governance of household probably falls into the first category. The latter, the influence of legal prose, might account for the passage which we quoted from Germain Pole's letter. It would also explain the only family letter written entirely in elevated style, that sent by Mary Barantyne to her brother Sir William Stonor in 1481:

I beseche yow and requyre yow, as ye ar a trewe Goddes knyth and the Kyngges, that ye avyse and cownsell my seyde husbond the contrary so beyng dysposed ... I beseche yow that thys seyde cownsell and avyse cum by your

¹³⁵Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 180, pp. 165-66 at p. 165.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, No. 180 at pp. 165-66.

selfe, and not of me in no wyse.¹³⁷

The second condition, that the 'plain style' characterise only the letters of familiars, is rather more complex question; it is one which cannot be treated definitively here. My impression, however, is that such a claim could not be substantiated. If, for example, we compare the letters sent by John Paston I to his servants, Richard Calle and James Gloys, and those directed to his wife Margaret in the same period, comparatively few differences seem to emerge. In both types of letter topics are organised loosely; informality is suggested by the simple and repetitious opening formulae 'And also', 'Also in leke wyse', 'And as for'. Conversely, adverbial conjunctions and legal vocabulary, which would be thought peculiar in modern personal letters, are found as much in letters sent just to Margaret as in those to the servants. In 1465, for example, he writes to Margaret:

Item, *for asmoch* as Ser Thomas have gaderid for the xxix yere of Kyng Herry, the seid John Russe woll, vnder colour of that, surmytte that he resevid in my tyme was therfore; *wherfore* ye must make a serche what he hath resevid sith Ser John Falstolff dyed, and what tyme, and *therupon* ye shall vndirstand what he hath resevid for me and what for hym.¹³⁸

Though they were not blood relatives, Calle and Gloys must be classed as part of the Paston 'familia', understood in the medieval sense of 'household'. Perhaps more telling, therefore, is the broad similarity which we seem to observe between the style of letters sent to relatives and those dispatched to acquaintances or even strangers. As in the examples examined above, this similarity applies at both ends of the stylistic spectrum. First, features of style which have been understood as colloquial, such as the use of proverbs and the quotation of spoken conversation, are found as much in letters to non-kin as in those to members of the nuclear family. For example, much has been made of passages such as the following, in the letter of Agnes Paston:

And þe seyð Warnys wyfe wyth a lovde vosse seyð, 'All þe deuylls in hell drawe here sowle to hell for þe weye þat she had mad!'.¹³⁹

Yet this differs little from many of the letters which John Shillingford, mayor of Exeter sent to his fellow citizens, concerning a trip to London to resolve a legal dispute. In 1447 he

¹³⁷SL, No. 294, pp. 384-5 at p. 385.

¹³⁸PL:I, No. 76, pp. 138-39 at p. 139. See MED, surmetten (v). This verb is primarily associated with legal documents.

¹³⁹PL:I, No. 23, pp. 35-36 at p. 36. To her son John Paston I.

writes, for example:

And therefore I, Mayor, withdrew me apart, and met with him at his going into his barge, and there took my leave of him saying these words: 'My Lord, I will await upon your good Lordship and your better leisure at another time'. He said to me again: 'Mayor, I pray you heartily that ye do so, and that ye speak with the Chief Justice, and what time that ever he will, I will be all ready.' And thus departed, &c.¹⁴⁰

On the other hand, characteristics of formality - a disciplined organisation of material, and the use of a complex vocabulary - are found as much in family letters as in those to other addressees. For example, around 1430 Margaret Walkerne asked her step-father for a loan, using both stock phrases and elements of vocabulary regularly found in letters to strangers of elevated rank:

*And for as moche as ladyes and gentilwemen and other frendys of my modres and myn ar lyk to vysite me while I ly inne childe bende [sic] and I am not purveyd of onest beddyng ... and also my frendys haue be put to so grevous costes and inportable charges thorough entangelyng of here aduersariis ... wherfor I wolde beseche you of youre goode faderhode that ye wol wouchesaf in savyng of myn husbondes worship and myn to lene me ij marc ...*¹⁴¹

As in the letters of the nobles, style at lower social levels seems to be dictated primarily by the status of the corresponding parties. The subject of the writing is another factor of some importance. Familiarity, as defined by kinship, is reflected only marginally in prose style. In the English letters of the late fifteenth century, as in their Anglo Norman antecedents, kinship is not a category which determines stylistic organisation.

iii. Vocabulary

In the letters of the early fifteenth century the language of 'affect' did not function to distinguish the 'private' family relations from the 'political' sphere. Conversely, the letters of kin contained frequent allusions to status and reputation, categories which, to the modern eye, appear to belong to the public sphere. We have seen that the developments of the later century - the expansion in the number of writers, and the transition to English - had little impact on the organisation of style. To what extent do these same changes affect the use of

¹⁴⁰S. A. Moore, ed., *Letters and Papers of J. Shillingford, Mayor of Exeter, 1447-50*, Camden Society n.s. 2 (1871), p. 4. Dialogue of this kind is found in still more formal contexts. See, for example, the Coventry petition mentioned in chapter two above, at *CLB:I*, pp. 181-82. See also the petition at *PL:II*, No. 867, pp. 505-06.

¹⁴¹Carpenter, ed., *Armburgh Papers*, pp. 126-27 at p. 127.

lexical categories? Perhaps even more than their Anglo-Norman precursors, English family letters seem at first to abound in words which connote intimate personal relations. In courtship, ideas of love and affection, which seem much like those of our own time, are frequently invoked. Concerning John Paston II's troubled engagement to Anne Haute, for example, his mother Margaret urges:

at þe reuerence of God for-sake yt nowt yf 3e can fynde in your harte to loue
hyr, so þat sche be suche on as 3e can thynke to haue jssu by...¹⁴²

The letter of Thomas Mull to William Stonor, in which he alludes to 'the trowbely wawes of love' is well known, as is the Margery Brews's Valentine, in which she tells her future husband 'Myn herte me byddys euer more to love 3owe'.¹⁴³

Similar language is also found in the broader family context.¹⁴⁴ For example, the Duke of Suffolk's final letter to his son ends 'as heartily and lovingly as ever father blessed his child in earth'.¹⁴⁵ At the turn of the fifteenth century Dorothy Plumpton asks her father to 'shew now by your fatherly kyndnesse that I am your child', signing 'your loving daughter'.¹⁴⁶ John Paston II sometimes describes Margaret as his 'kynde' and 'tendre' mother; on one occasion he thanks her for her 'good moderhood, kyndenesse, cheere, charge, and coste', on another for her 'tenderness and helpe bothe to me, my brothere, and servantys'.¹⁴⁷ Richard Cely recommends himself to his younger brother George 'in as louynge whyse as harte cone thynke' while in 1475 Thomas Stonor wrote to Sir William thanking him 'for the luffe þat ye sewde to my sole whan ye harde of my distres'.¹⁴⁸

By the later fifteenth century we see that concepts such as 'love', 'kindness' and

¹⁴²Ibid., p. 381.

¹⁴³PL:I, No. 415, pp. 662-63 at p. 662.

¹⁴⁴SL, No. 123, p. 214.

¹⁴⁵Lyell, ed., *Medieval Postbag*, No. 65, p. 204.

¹⁴⁶Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 201, pp. 182-83 at p. 183.

¹⁴⁷PL:I, Nos. 285 and 284, pp. 474-5 and 475-76.

¹⁴⁸CL, No. 86, pp. 75-76 at p. 75; SL, No. 153, p. 246. Also, in a rather different social milieu, Margaret of Anjou informed Dame Jane Carew of the desire of her 'sewer of mouth' to marry her 'aswel for the greet zeale, love, and affection that he hath unto yo^r persone, as for the womanly and vertuouse governance that ye be renowned of ...'. Monro, ed., *Letters of Queen Margaret of Anjou*, No. LXV, pp. 96-98 at p. 97.

'tenderness' are used as frequently by 'mere' gentry and merchants as they are by the nobility. Yet the wider epistolary context shows them to be terms which still do not pertain solely, or even primarily, to a 'private' vocabulary of emotion. One term which seems sometimes to designate kinship rather than other sorts of relationship is 'kind'. According to the *Middle English Dictionary* one of the concepts designated by 'kinde' is that of parentage or descent; in the *Romance of William of Palerne* it is said of a werewolf that 'þe ... king of spayne was kindely his fader'.¹⁴⁹ Another, more common meaning of the term is that which is 'natural' or proper.¹⁵⁰ Thomas Usk famously argued that Englishmen should write in English and Frenchmen in French 'for it is kyndely to their mouthes', while a fifteenth-century courtesy text instructs yeomen of the chambre to 'take away stolis and bordes and trestelles, and set þem in þer kynde places'.¹⁵¹ In this sense too the word may designate a specific idea of kinship. Thus when Dorothy Plumpton asks that her father be 'good and kind father unto me', or when Jane Stonor assures her daughter that 'as ye thynk I sshuld be unkynde to yow, verrely þat I am nat ... I am and wyll be to yow as a moder sshuld be' they may be invoking a code of behaviour particular to the position of parenthood.¹⁵²

In other examples, however, it seems unlikely that this term designates either particular intimacy, or attitudes associated specifically with kinship. For example, in the same letter in which she requests her father's kindness, Dorothy Plumpton asks Sir Robert that he write to Lady Darcy, in whose household she had been placed:

& wryt to my lady, thanking hir good ladyship of hir so loving & tender kyndnesse shewed vnto me, beseching hir ladyship of good contynewance therof.¹⁵³

In many other service relationships too the idea of kindness is invoked; indeed, these terms seem invariably to describe the actions of a superior to a servant. For example, John Morre

¹⁴⁹*MED*, kinde (a)3; W. W. Skeat, ed., *The Romance of William of Palerne*, EETS e.s. 1 (1867), p. 111.

¹⁵⁰*MED*, kinde (a)1; kindeli, (a)1.

¹⁵¹Thomas Usk, *The Testament of Love* ed., R. Allen Shoaf (Kalamazoo, 1998), p. 49; R. W. Chambers, ed., *A Fifteenth-Century Courtesy Book*, EETS 148 (1914), p. 14, l. 22.

¹⁵²*SL*, No. 120, pp. 210-211 at p. 211; Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 201, pp. 182-83.

¹⁵³Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 201, pp. 182-83.

writes to Sir Robert Plumpton:

- I recommend me vnto your mastership, thanking your mastership hartly of your kindly & hartely mastership shewed vnto me, vnderued of my partie as yet.¹⁵⁴

In 1450 William Yelverton opens a letter to his master, Sir John Fastolf, with thanks for 'manye grete gentlenesse and kyndnesse that ye hafe shewed vnto me', while in 1485 Elizabeth, countess of Surrey wrote to John Paston III:

I have fownde myn lord of Oxenforth singuler very good and kynde lord to myn lord and me, and stedefaste in hys promys, wher-by he hath wonne myn lordys service as longe as he leevyth...¹⁵⁵

Though it is sometimes used to describe the deportment of a servant towards a lord, so frequently does 'kindness' appear as a virtue ascribed to a superior, that it seems possible that in these cases it does not truly refer to an emotional attitude of any kind.¹⁵⁶ In 1472 John Paston famously described the Earl of Arran as 'þe most corteys, gentylest, wysest, kyndest ... knyght'.¹⁵⁷ This suggests that 'kindness' retains some of the connotations of the Anglo-Norman 'gentillesce'. Thus even when addressed to parents, this language may refer not so much to actions or feelings, but to status - to the inherent quality of 'gentility'.¹⁵⁸

The noun 'kindness' is often paired with a second, 'tenderness'. Though, as we have seen, this concept is sometimes applied to parents, it too, seems to belong primarily to the vocabulary of good lordship. In 1482, for example, T. Cryne describes John Paston III as 'my most kyndest and tenderest and vnderued most contynuell maister'.¹⁵⁹ Around 1453 Margaret of Anjou wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury urging him to show 'th'ease, faver and tendernesse that ye goodly may' to a petitioner.¹⁶⁰ In the reign of Henry VII one

¹⁵⁴Ibid., No. 141, p. 134.

¹⁵⁵PL:II, No. 877, p. 523; No. 802, pp. 444-45, p. 445.

¹⁵⁶For example, in the letter of the Countess of Surrey the addressee, John Paston III is thanked 'of your greet kyndnes and loving disposicion towardys myn lord and me'. In a letter to his younger brother John, John Paston II complains of the 'onkyndnesse' of his servants. PL:II, No. 802, p. 444; PL:I, No. 275, pp. 460-61 at p. 461.

¹⁵⁷PL:I, No. 352, pp. 573-75.

¹⁵⁸MED, kinde (a)6; kindeli (a) 4.

¹⁵⁹PL:II, No. 794, pp. 438-39 at p. 438.

¹⁶⁰Monro, ed., *Letters of Margaret of Anjou*, No. LXVIII, pp. 99-100 at p. 100.

writer thanks Sir Robert Plumpton ‘of your tender and loving favour shewed to my poore kynsman’, while another expresses gratitude for ‘your tender mastership shewed to me in all causes’.¹⁶¹ Like ‘kindness’, if the idea of ‘tenderness’ connotes emotion at all, it is not of the same kind as that which we associate with the private intimacy of the modern family. Insofar as it refers to feeling at all, it is that associated with worship, with the refined sensibility of the aristocrat or the liberality which stems from power.¹⁶²

Perhaps even more emphatically than the concepts ‘kindness’ and ‘tenderness’, the idea of love in fifteenth century letters is restricted neither to kinship, nor to anything corresponding to the modern notion of the ‘private sphere’. Indeed, where in Anglo-Norman letters love seems to be connected to ideas of nobility, by the mid-fifteenth century it seems to have emerged as a concept central to notions of governance at levels of society. In 1469, for example, the city of Coventry received a letter from Edward IV requesting them to arrest dissenters. The city officers were warned:

geving yow in comandement what shall be do ferthermore for their punyssment in that parte; not faylyng as ye love us, and tendre the comune welfare off all this our reame & subgettis of the same...¹⁶³

The same idea was in play in the relations between nobles and their servants. In 1503 the Earl of Oxford wrote to his counsellor John Paston III:

I trust in short tyme, doing my pilgrimage to Walsingham, to se you in tho parties, and than to thanke you for your right gode and louyng remembraunce whiche I well vndirstond by these and diuerse otherys nat owt of mynde ne forgotyn, whiche shall nat be in my behalue forgotyn, by the grace of God, who haue you in keping.¹⁶⁴

Amongst gentlemen too, the notion of love appears to have been at least as much a political as a personal one. In 1480 Sir William Stonor was offered the following advice concerning

¹⁶¹Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 72, p. 83 and No. 48, p. 68. See also *CL*, No. 17, pp. 15-16 ‘Y recommaunde me vnto your gode maystership, desiryng to here of your prosperous welfare, which Jhesu preserue to your cordyall desyre, thankyng you hertly of your grete gentilnes and tender fauour to me hereafore shewde ...’.

¹⁶²*MED*, *tendernes* (se) (n.). The expressions used in letters seem to fall into sense 4, rather than sense 3a, which refers to emotional states. Most examples in the latter sense are found in collocations such as ‘tendernes of hert’ or ‘tendernes of loue’.

¹⁶³*CLB*:I, p. 341.

¹⁶⁴*PL*:II, No. 850, p. 487.

a land dispute:

After my sympel advise hit were wel don this somer, that ye cam unto Wolston, and my lady with you, and to ly there: ye have whete y-now there for a while: hit shuld cause you to have love of the Gentilmen of the Shere, and Comyns also: and after that ever to have hit in pease.¹⁶⁵

Both mercantile and gentle correspondents make frequent allusion to political friends and allies as 'lovers', or as men 'that loveth you'.¹⁶⁶ As we saw in chapter two above, by this period too, the idea of love as a political concept is clearly marked in the urban sphere. Not only guild regulations but also the discourse of civic governance make ample use of such ideas.¹⁶⁷

In fifteenth century English letters, as in their Anglo-Norman predecessors, the vocabulary of 'the heart' belongs as much to a discourse of service as to that of kinship or intimacy; the boundaries between the two categories, as before, are blurred. To what extent, then, is this elision of relationships observable from the other direction? Does a 'public' vocabulary, of status and reputation, continue to characterise the family letters of this period as much as those sent to lords? This investigation could examine many different aspects of letters, but perhaps the simplest and most productive area of investigation is that provided by the vocabulary of address. As before, the most extreme examples of the subordination or absorption of kinship into status categories are provided by the letters of the nobility. In a letter thought to have been sent by the Earl of Oxford to his wife in 1471, the addressee is referred to simply as 'Ryght reuerent and wyrchypfull lady', never as wife.¹⁶⁸ In a letter to his elder brother, Edmund, Earl of Suffolk, Richard de la Pole follows the same practice writing:

Sir, I ombully recomaund me on to your grace. Sir, I beseche your grace gyf credens to Stase towchyng soche mater as ys brokyn to me of, and of the sayd mater that I may shortly have answare how ye wyll stonde in thys cawse.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵SL, No. 272, p. 365.

¹⁶⁶PL:I, No. 117, pp. 200-02.

¹⁶⁷See the useful discussion in Michael Clanchy, 'Law and Love in the Middle Ages' in J. Bossy, ed., *Disputes and Settlements: law and human relations in the West* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 47-67.

¹⁶⁸PL:II, No. 915, pp. 591-92 at 592.

¹⁶⁹Gairdner, ed., *Letters of Richard III and Henry VII*:I, No. XXXIII, p. 258. See also Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 3:I, pp. 125-27.

The Earl of March and his brother are not quite as extreme as these writers in their marginalisation of kinship. Here some allusion is made to the relationship which binds them to their addressee. A letter of 1454 opens:

Ryght heigh and myghty prince our most worshipfull and gretely redoubted
Lorde and Ffader in as lowely wyse as any sonnes can or may we recomaunde
us un to your good lordeship.¹⁷⁰

Yet here too, the emphasis is placed on the status of the addressee, on his public function as a prince, rather than his domestic role, as a parent.

The oblique nature of the evidence from the Anglo-Norman period meant that our observations concerning the gentry and middling groups, such as the merchants, were of necessity tentative. By the mid-fifteenth century, however, evidence for writers of this status has become abundant; clearer conclusions can therefore be drawn concerning the conceptual organisation of kinship at this social level. As with the letters of the nobility, those of lower groups show considerable concern to acknowledge the social status of the addressee. Children and wives of both gentle and merchant origin routinely address their relatives by status epithets such as 'worshipfull', 'reverent' or 'honourable', which are also directed towards lords and masters.¹⁷¹ Though kinship terms such as 'moder', 'brodyr' or 'husbond' do appear in salutations, titles such as 'sir' or 'lady' are equally common, particularly where the status of the addressee is greater than that of the writer. John Paston III consistently refers to his elder brother as 'Ryght worchepfull syr' and alludes to him throughout the body of his letters as 'sir', though he, an esquire, is often addressed simply brother, or 'welbeloved brother'. Agnes and Isabel Plumpton addressed their husbands 'Sir', and the same form is used by Margery Cely to her wool-merchant spouse George.¹⁷² The same phenomenon occurs still more frequently in third-person references to kin. For example, a letter from one J. Marny to his father, written in the final decade of the century, opens:

¹⁷⁰BL, MS Cotton Vespasian F. XIII, f. 90.

¹⁷¹The Celys always address their father as 'worshipful'. John Collas writes to his mother-in-law 'Ryth Reuerant and velbelowyd worchypffull modyr'; Thomas Ellis, who seems to have been a servant in an urban household, begins 'Ryth worschypfull modyr'. *CL*, Nos. 22, 41, 45-46, 93, 109, 112 inter alia; Lyell, ed., *Medieval Postbag*, No. 110, p. 294; PRO, SC1/44/33.

¹⁷²Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, Nos. 168, 170-72, 186, 188-90, 199; *CL*, No. 222, p. 222. Even in a letter which Richard Calle thought entirely private, he addressed his wife 'my lady' and 'Mastres'. *PL:II*, No. 861, pp. 498-500.

My most reuerentt & worshyppfull ffadyr, I recommend me un to yow & to my lady my moder...¹⁷³

Edith Neville, writing to her daughter, conveys greetings from her spouse:

My lord, my husband, recommends <him> unto you both, and sends you yowr obblegasiyn ...¹⁷⁴

In these last examples the motive for the use of titles seems not simply a concern with status. Rather, there seems to be a blurring of boundaries between kinship and service relationships, reminiscent of prince Henry's representation of himself as his fathers 'subject and liegemen'. The effect is seen still more clearly in the way in which signatories describe themselves. Sir Robert Plumpton's illegitimate brother writes to their father as 'your mastership' and to Sir Robert as 'mastership and brotherhode' signing letters to both 'Your servant'.¹⁷⁵ In this case, the picture is complicated by the writer's unorthodox relationship to his addressees, and also by the fact that he seems to have transacted business on his brother's behalf; he thus might be seen to qualify as a servant in the narrow sense. However, language of this type is also found in relationships where no such circumstances obtain. Margery Paston signs two of her letters to her husband, John Paston III, 'Be yowre seruaunt' and two others 'Be youre seruaunt and bedewoman'.¹⁷⁶ The only extant letter from Edmond Paston to his mother ends '3our vmbleson and seruant', and similar formulae are consistently used by John Paston II and John Paston III to their parents John Paston I and Margaret. Indeed, John Paston continues to use this signature even when the death of his elder brother placed him above her in status, as legal head of the family.¹⁷⁷

The letters of children, spouses and siblings bear a broad similarity; in all these relationships addressees are greeted by the same status epithets as those used by strangers or servants. The letters of parents to children, however, differ from this pattern. Very occasionally children, like other relations, are saluted in the same mode as strangers of comparable social

¹⁷³PRO, SC1/52/53. See also Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, Nos. 157, 179, 201, 212, 213, 218 inter alia.

¹⁷⁴Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 200, p. 182.

¹⁷⁵Ibid., Nos. 26, 150, 154, 173, 182.

¹⁷⁶PL:I, Nos 417-18 and Nos 419-20.

¹⁷⁷PL:I, No. 399, pp. 640-41 at 641.

standing. For example, at the very beginning of the century Agnes Fry writes 'With all manner of reverence and blessings as to my worshipful son', while at the very end of the period Edith Neville addresses her daughter 'Myn own good Lady Plumpton'.¹⁷⁸ More frequently, however, parents adopt modes of address quite different to those used by other writers. In the period in which other correspondents reflected his status as a knight, writing 'Ryth worchepful ser', Margaret Paston addressed John Paston II simply 'Right welbeloued son'.¹⁷⁹ Though other correspondents addressed William Stonor by terms such as 'reverent' or 'worshipful', his father begins abruptly 'Willm Stonor'.¹⁸⁰ In 1493 one Joan Boldey wrote with equal lack of ceremony to her son John, a monk at St Katherine Gallyntyne:

Sone, I am verey gladd that god hathe called you to be hys servaunt... goddes
blessynge and myne ye have ...¹⁸¹

The same pattern is found among nobles. In 1497, for example, Thomas, earl of Ormonde began a letter to his son-in-law 'Right welbeloved Sone'.¹⁸²

These formulae seem to suggest that the parent-child relations were understood as a separate category, unaffected by 'public' considerations such as status. This impression might be reinforced by the inclusion of blessings, in formulae like that seen in Joan Boldey's letter above, which distinguish parental missives from those of other writers.¹⁸³ If considered in a broader context, however, different conclusions might be drawn. First, by using 'son' or a combination of names, parents avoid the modern practice of addressing a child by his or her first name. In fact, the salutations of other letters, and allusions in the body of these texts, suggests that unqualified Christian names were used only to young

¹⁷⁸PRO, E28/29/50 in Malcolm Richardson, 'Women, Commerce and Writing in Late Medieval England', *Disputatio* 1 (1996): 123-147, p. 139. As analogues see Dame Elizabeth Brews to her son-in-law 'Ryght wurschypfull cosyn', and Margaret Stephen to her grandson 'Right reuerente and worshipfull'. *PL:II*, Nos. 789-90 at pp. 434-35; PRO, SC1/51/104.

¹⁷⁹*PL:II*, Nos. 771-3, 778-79, 781.

¹⁸⁰*SL*, No. 97, pp. 190-91, at p. 191. Another example is found at *PL:I*, No. 223, p. 374.

¹⁸¹PRO, SC1/51/135.

¹⁸²PRO, SC1/51/141i.; See also the letter of the Duke of Suffolk to his son in J. Gairdner, ed., *Paston Letters*, No. 91, pp. 121-22.

¹⁸³The same might be implied by allusions to parents as 'worshipful' even when their social status seems not to justify the use of the term

children and/or to individuals of menial status.¹⁸⁴ Though they seem simple, the formulae addressed to gentry children thus reflect a certain degree of concern with the social standing of addressee. Indeed, by the middle of the fifteenth century, the two-name formula, used by both the Paston and Stonor parents, seems to have become established as a mode of address used by lords to servants of gentle rank. For example, this is the formula used by John Paston I to James Gresham in 1450, by William Paston II to the farmer of one of his manors in 1480, and by William Lord Hastings to his 'servant' John Paston III in 1483.¹⁸⁵ The profile of 'welbeloved' in the same period seems very similar. Like its Anglo-Norman precursor 'bien améz', this seems to be a non-specific term, most commonly used by the superior partner in a service relationship when writing to an inferior. In the mid-fifteenth century, nobles characteristically salute gentlemen 'Right trusty and entirely welbeloved', for example, and the same condescension is implied by the simpler salutation 'Welbeloved', which the clerk of Sir William Stonor's receiver addresses to a tenant farmer.¹⁸⁶ What we see in the salutations of parents to children is not, therefore, an assertion that the relationship is immune from considerations of status. Rather, parental modes of address are the mirror image of the salutations and subscriptions of children. Not only does status remain a central concept, as it does in the organisation of style, but here kinship seems almost to be elided into the vocabulary of service.

iv. Rhetoric

As we have already noted, a great many letters from this period, if classified functionally, would have to be called 'petitionary letters'. The kind of requests which are made, and the mode in which they are expressed, offers a promising final area for the investigation of concepts of kinship. When we explored salutations we saw that kinship terms occur with some frequency in the letters of writers of gentry and merchant status, if not in those of the nobility. The same observation may be made of the terminology in which requests are made.

¹⁸⁴See for example, Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, Nos. 88, 113, 187, 215, 217; *SL*, Nos. 165, 167, 172, 180.

¹⁸⁵*PL*:I, Nos. 221, 224, 225, pp. 371-71, 375-76, 376-77; *PL*:II, No. 807, pp. 448-49.

¹⁸⁶*SL*, No. 265, p. 359. See also a letter to the servant Joyce Parmenter in the Cely Letters. *CL*, No. 126, p. 114. The other letter to this correspondent begins in the same style as letters from Richard Cely the elder to his children - that is, with no form of address, and the condescending salutation 'I gret yow whell'. *Ibid.* No. 120, p. 109.

The Earls of March and Rutland are found beseeching ‘your *good lordeschip* to remembre our porteux, and that we myght have sum fyne boonetts sende un to us’, and Lora Butler asks her ‘good lordshyp’ to remember her journey to London. The Pastons, Plumptons, Stonors and Celys, on the other hand, usually appeal more straightforwardly to the ‘gode faderhode’, ‘gode moderhode’ or ‘gode broderhode’ of their addressees.¹⁸⁷ However, as in salutations, so too rhetorically, the use of kinship concepts does not stand alone; appeals are usually accompanied by other arguments. In many cases these are drawn directly from the repertoire of service. As we saw in chapter three above, one of the characteristic tropes of aristocratic rhetoric was the offer to perform a future service in return for the granting of a current favour. Thus in 1479 Sir Edmund Rede ends a letter to Sir William Stonor with the offer, ‘y shall to my power do as moche for yow in tyme to com’.¹⁸⁸ In family letters appeals to this code of honour are often found. In 1503, for example, Germain Pole wrote to his father-in-law asking for help in a dispute with his grandmother:

Also, Sir, I desired you in my last letter to be so gud father vnto me, as to com speake with my grandam for diuerse matters, the which longeth vnto my profit. Howbeit I have no gud answeere of you, but now I will desire you, for the reuerence of Jesu, to doe for me now as i will do for you, if my power were vnto my will, & make it in your way to com speake with hir for the welfare & profit of your daughter, my wyfe, & me.¹⁸⁹

Around 1429 Robert Armbrugh wrote a desperate plea to his brother William for the loan of a sum of money:

I pray yow with all myn hert as I may do for yow in tyme comyng that ye woll wochesaf to lene me x or xij marc or summe notable summe wherthorough I might be releuyd and my worship sauud ...¹⁹⁰

Nearly fifty years later William Harleston appealed to his brother-in-law for money ‘fayll me nat now, as ye wyll have eny good turne of me anothyr day’.¹⁹¹ In 1473 John Paston II wrote to his younger brother John asking him to ensure delivery of a letter:

I praye yowe to take a labore acordyng afftre the tenure off the same, and þat

¹⁸⁷BL, MS Cotton Vespasian F. XIII, f. 90; PRO, SC1/51/71.

¹⁸⁸SL, No. 242, pp. 336-37 at p. 337. Other examples occur in *ibid.*, Nos. 198, 201, 206, 274, 282, 333. See also *PL:II*, Nos. 515, 533, 701, 814.

¹⁸⁹Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 180, pp. 165-66 at p. 166.

¹⁹⁰Carpenter, ed., *Armbrugh Papers*, p. 103.

¹⁹¹SL, No. 135, pp. 227-28 at p. 228.

I maye haue an answeare at London ... iff any massenger come, as eu[er]e I maye doo fore yow.¹⁹²

A second concept characteristic of gentry discourse is the idea that the addressee will perform a service in order to justify the trust reposed in him by the writer. For example, in 1470 John Paston II asked his 'best betrustyd frende, Rogere Townerende' to lend him money:

as my trust is in yow and as I wolde in like case haue don to yow, and as in the premysses I delt feithfully wyth yow and evir so shall dele ...¹⁹³

As with reciprocity, the same language also pervades the discourse of intimates. Five years after the letter quoted above, John Paston III included the following in a postscript to his brother Sir John:

Also, brodyr Edmund, I prey yow and my brodyr Syr John be not in London, that ye wyll labore all thys maters wyth effect, as my trust is in yow, jn every poynt as is aboue wretyn.¹⁹⁴

In 1453 it was John Paston I's sister, Elizabeth, who required the assistance of her kinsman, this time in the arrangement of her marriage. Margaret Paston reminds her husband:

And she desyrith, if itt pleased yow, þat ye shuld yeve þe jantylman þat ye know of seche langage as he myght fele by yow þat ye wull be wele willyng to þe mater ... She seyth her full trost is in yow, and as ye do þer-inne she woll agré here þer-to.¹⁹⁵

The same expressions are also found in the letters of parents to children. Around 1468 Thomas Stonor wrote asking his son William to obtain some arrows 'and that hit be not ffaylyd as my trust is in yow'.¹⁹⁶ In the final decade of the century, Dame Elizabeth Brews requested the attendance of her son-in-law John Paston III:

I prey 3ow harttyly, son, and reqwere 3ow, þat 3owyr men may be wyth me on Monday, ass my wery tross yss jn 3ow ...¹⁹⁷

¹⁹²*PL:I*, No. 275, pp. 460-61 at p. 460.

¹⁹³*PL:I*, No. 247, pp. 411-12 at p. 412.

¹⁹⁴*Ibid.*, No. 364, pp. 591-92 at p. 592.

¹⁹⁵*Ibid.*, No. 145, pp. 247-48 at pp. 247-48.

¹⁹⁶*SL*, No. 97, pp. 190-91 at p. 191.

¹⁹⁷*PL:II*, No. 820, p. 461.

One more concept is of considerable significance in highlighting the rhetorical overlap between discourses of kinship and of status. As we saw when we discussed modes of address, individuals sometimes present themselves as the ‘servants’ of their relations. In mobilising the good will of the addressee of a letter, the rhetoric of service is also frequently to be seen in the body of the letters of family members. At times these references are simply to ‘a service’, that is to a particular task undertaken. Often, however, the allusion is emphatically to a wider, more durable kind of obligation, like that which a retainer might owe to his lord. In 1472 John Paston III wrote to his brother John Paston II in effusive style:

thankyng yow most hertly of your gret cost whyche ye dyd on me at my last being wyth yow at London, whyche to my power I wyll recompence yow wyth the best seruyse that lythe in me to do for your plesure whyll my wyttys be myn owne.¹⁹⁸

In a slightly different milieu, Richard Marchall, who appears to have been wool merchant, wrote to his brother William, a Chancery clerk, in a bid to raise a loan. If the money were forthcoming, he protests:

truly hyt wowolde be a grete assayle un to my fader & to me & as euer I may be your seruant y^t ze labor there for, or els y^t wee may not bye no woll & y^t qwere grete herte unto us and schame.¹⁹⁹

Above we saw that Agnes Stonor referred to her spouse Sir William not as ‘husband’ but ‘Maister’. The implications of this term are carried through into the rhetoric of the letter.

She opens, for example:

Right worshipfull Maister, y hertly comaund me unto you with alle suche servise as y can or may: thonking you of youre kyndnesse shewed unto me, so pore a woman as y am, and unto your Maistershyp owndeserved.²⁰⁰

The extent to which this depends on wider discourses of service is illustrated by comparison with a petition submitted to Chancery in the same century:

Thokynge ... gou [sic] with alle myn herte for þe grete godenesse and noble maisterschipe yat 3e hauen shewede to me Bifore þis tyme withouten eny cause of deserte in me ... As I shal eueremor and with oute fayouour do 3ou seruyce and plesance to my symple power...²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ *PL*:I, No. 358, pp. 585-86 at p. 585.

¹⁹⁹ Lyell, ed., *Medieval Postbag*, No. 104, p. 284.

²⁰⁰ *SL*, No. 262, pp. 356-57 at p. 356.

²⁰¹ Petition of Cecily Tikell of London, in *ACE*, p. 161.

In this last example kinship seems to be entirely displaced by concepts of service. In other cases it is wider 'chivalric' notions which displace blood kinship as the grounds for an appeal. Writing in 1481 Mary Barantyne was eager that her brother help to persuade her husband not to sell part of his estate. Yet she requests this favour from Sir William not as a brother, but as a man of honour and standing:

wherfor I beseche yow and requyre yow, as ye are a trewe Goddes knyth and the Kyngges, that ye avyse and cownsell my seyde husbond the contrary, so beyng dysposyd, as my very tryste is in yow.²⁰²

Mary's rhetorical emphasis might be explained by her junior position in the family, or by the sensitive nature of the request. However, neither reason would account satisfactorily for Thomas Stonor's choice of words in thanking his brother 'for the luffe þat ye sewde my sole whan ye harde of my distres':

God kennes þat any powere where to my wylle I shulde as largely quite your kyndenes and gentilnes as ever dud eny gentyman to armes.²⁰³

In these examples, as in the royal letters of the first decades of the century, writers appeal to their addressees as individuals of standing; intimacy, or the blood relationship which exist between them is reduced rhetorically to a secondary position.

v. Exceptions

Overall the Middle English letters of the fifteenth century seem to conform very closely to the model of their Anglo-Norman predecessors. As in French, so too in English, style and language are dictated as much by status as by kinship. In both languages the boundaries between ideas of family and service are blurred. To suggest that the arenas of kinship and service were entirely undifferentiated, or that the Anglo-Norman and English evidence were identical, would, however, be misleading. In two particular areas some deviation is apparent from the general pattern. The first group of relationships which appear 'aberrant' in this respect are those of the mercantile stratum. Letters directed to parents by members of this group differ little from those written by aristocratic correspondents; both groups use deferential modes of address and respectful epithets such as 'reverent' and 'worshipful'. In other relationships, however, merchants seem to place less emphasis on status than their

²⁰²SL, No. 294, pp. 384-85 at p. 385.

²⁰³SL, No. 153, pp. 245-46 at p. 246.

aristocratic peers, and more value on the blood relationship. George Cely and Richard Cely the younger generally prefer modes of address such as 'Ryght whellbelouyd brother' which avoid overt reference to status.²⁰⁴ More unusual still, in the context of fifteenth-century correspondence, is the mode in which Richard Cely the elder addresses his sons. In the great majority of other fifteenth-century letters the pronominal form which the writer uses to the addressee is the polite 'you' form.²⁰⁵ Richard Cely, on the other hand, generally prefers the informal or affectionate 'thou'. A letter to his son George begins, for example:

I grete *the* wyll, and I haue resayuyd a letter from *the* wryt at Caleys the xxix day of Jun, the weche letter I haue wyll understand.²⁰⁶

In both these examples, kinship appears to be given priority over status. Modes of address seems to reflect the blood, and perhaps even the emotional bond between writer and addressee, and not the status which is of such importance in most fifteenth century letters.

Here again, however, the comparative method offers an important corrective to our initial impressions. Though many merchants do use status epithets when writing to one another, just as many eschew the practice, favouring more neutral modes of address such as 'welbeloued sir'.²⁰⁷ Others even reject the title 'sir', replacing it with the guild term 'brother'. Perhaps because they did not fit neatly into fifteenth-century status categories, merchants observe slightly different conventions to aristocratic correspondents. Yet as with their gentle peers, merchants draw only limited distinction between kin and strangers. Richard Cely's use of the 'thou' pronoun can also perhaps be explained by the anomalous status position enjoyed by merchants at this time. When the 'you' pronoun first began to be used in the singular in English, it belonged to the vocabulary of the aristocracy and the court. Though use of the form was gaining wider currency in the fifteenth century, it may

²⁰⁴CL, Nos. 4, 8, 95, 133, 169, 174-75 inter alia. Occasionally more formal modes are seen. Robert sometimes addresses George by title or status epithets (Nos. 21, 35, 102). However, the more informal modes are considerably more common between the brothers.

²⁰⁵The obvious exception is a vitriolic letter in the Armbrugh collection. Carpenter, ed., *Armbrugh Papers*, pp. 120-23.

²⁰⁶CL, No. 26, p. 24. See also, inter alia, Nos. 2, 11-13, 23-24, 27.

²⁰⁷Thomas Maykyn writes to his 'master' William Marchall, a chancery clerk 'Well beloued Syr', 'Well by louyd and trusty frende'. Lyell, ed., *Medieval Postbag*, Nos. 105-06, pp. 285-86. Indeed, the importance of guild membership in this stratum of society means that letters between friends and even strangers often closely resemble those between kin.

not yet have been in general use among lower strata of society.²⁰⁸ Richard Cely's use of the 'thou' form probably reflects not affection, but the perception that a child of merchant stock did not warrant the more respectful salutation from his parent and superior. In the mercantile context status does not take such obvious priority over kinship as it does in the aristocratic arena. Yet here too there is no clear discursive boundary between the 'public' relationships of friends and business partners, and the 'private' connection of blood or kinship.

The second area which displays some differences from the general pattern is marriage.²⁰⁹ As far as we can tell from the slight evidence, letters written by noble spouses in the fifteenth century differ no more strongly from public 'letters of service' than do those exchanged by parents and children and siblings. At lower social levels, however, a more particularised vocabulary is sometimes seen. At the close of the fifteenth century, for example, Robert Plumpton sent a letter to his wife Agnes, which begins 'My deare hart' and ends 'By your owne loue'. The latter formula can be found in many contemporary letters, particularly in those sent by churchmen to their secular masters, and so cannot be associated with a specifically connubial vocabulary. The former collocation, however, finds no parallels in the letters of the period. In fact, rather than forming part of the epistolary repertoire, this expression seems to be drawn from poetic discourse. In this context it is sometimes used to refer to the relations between knights. In *Sir Ferumbras*, a fourteenth-century Charlemagne romance, the following masculine exchange is found:

Charlis to Oliuer saide þo, 'god help þe, dere herte,
þat þou mote ouercome our fo & come ayeyn inquerte'²¹⁰

However, such expressions are more commonly found in the eroticised context of heterosexual love.²¹¹ In his own mind, for example, Troilus apostrophises Criseyde:

O mercy, dere herte, and help me from

²⁰⁸Derek Pearsall, 'The Franklin's Tale, Line 1469: Forms of Address in Chaucer', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 17 (1995): 65-78; David Burnley, 'Langland's Clergial Lunatic', in Helen Phillips, ed., *Langland, the Mystics and Medieval English Religious Tradition: Essays in Honour of S. S. Hussey* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 31-38.

²⁰⁹Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 162, p. 152.

²¹⁰S. J. Herritage, ed., *The English Charlemagne Romances: I: Sir Ferumbras*, EETS, e.s. 34 (1879), p. 10, ll. 324-25.

²¹¹Pearsall presents a partial discussion of modes of address between husbands and wives in the fourteenth century in 'The Franklin's Tale', pp. 73-74. He also notes the comparative paucity of scholarly literature on the question.

The deth, for I, whil that my lyf may laste,
More than myself wol love yow to my laste...²¹²

A still more striking example of particularised discourse is found in a letter sent by Thomas Stonor to his wife Jane in 1468. The address of the letter 'To my cosyn Jane Stonor', conforms closely to the tradition which we have already explored, in which nuclear ties were assimilated into more general bonds. In the body of the letter, however, the language is organised rather differently. Thomas salutes his wife 'My oone good Jane'. Later, the same expression is repeated, with the addition of a still more intimate epithet:

And *Lemman*, charge Wykys to gete as myche money as eney be had ... And goode swete *Lemman*, be ye myry and of goode comfort for to cumfort me when I cum.²¹³

The use of the term 'lemman' deserves careful scrutiny. First, and most clearly, the noun divorces this relationship from the wider discourse of service; Christ is sometimes addressed as 'lemman' but a secular master would never use this term to his servant. Second, though the connotations of this word seem to have varied according to time, place and genre, it seems possible that the application of the term to a gentlewoman marks a violation of status etiquette. Chaucer's *Manciple* states:

But that the gentile, in estaat above,
She shal be cleped his lady, as in love;
And for that oother is a povre womman,
She shal be cleped his wenche or his lemman.²¹⁴

The exact reference of this word may never perhaps be reconstructed with complete confidence; it has, for example, been noted that 'lemman' remains in use in courtly romances of the fourteenth century.²¹⁵ A further clue as to the intended tone in this case is, however, provided by the opening formula of address, 'Myne oone good Jane'. As we have seen, 'higher' servants and adult children are generally addressed by both fore- and surname in this period; only young children and 'mere' servants are saluted by their Christian name. In this context, however, the qualifiers 'swete' and 'myne oone' render condescension an

²¹²Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book I, ll. 535-37 in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 480.

²¹³*SL*, No. 91, p. 185.

²¹⁴Chaucer, *The Manciple's Tale*, ll. 217-20 in *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Benson, p. 285.

²¹⁵N. F. Blake, *The English Language in Medieval Literature* (London and New York, 1977), pp. 80-81; David Burnley, *A Guide to Chaucer's Language* (London, 1983), pp. 168-69.

implausible intention. It would seem that Thomas Stonor is ignoring social etiquette not to denigrate his wife, but rather to create an intimate sphere in which rules of precedence do not apply. By downplaying the idea of hierarchy, both social and sexual, Stonor constructs a zone of familiarity, in which the marital relationship can exist.

In the fifteenth century modes of address of this kind remain unusual in the letters of husbands to wives. In the letters of wives they are rarer still; as we have seen, many writers never even use the word 'husband' in their correspondence, preferring more deferential terms such as 'sir' or 'master'. However, two suggestive examples do survive from the final quarter of the century. First, in 1481, three years after the famous Valentines, Margery Paston opens a letter to Sir John 'Myne owyn swete herte, jn my most humyl wyse I recomaunde me on-to you'²¹⁶ This letter is one of those which has been signed 'Be yowre seruaunt and bedewoman' in the writer's own hand, thus what we see here can hardly be seen as a wholesale rejection of the importance of status in relations of intimacy. Nevertheless, like the salutations of Sir Robert Plumpton's letters, this formula represents the importation of a particularised vocabulary of heterosexual intimacy into the wider discourse of service and gentility. The second example is more emphatic, though in some respects more difficult to categorise. A chance survival found in the Public Records, dated simply 'tempus Henry VII', seems to have been written by a wife of merchant status. Here, as in the letters of Margery Paston, some 'traditional' elements survive. A. Wootton commends herself to her husband 'In the most lowly maner that I cane'. She addresses her spouse as 'Sir', and her requests are expressed in deferential terms 'I be seche you to send me your mend'. In other respects, however, the writer distinguishes herself from her antecedents by staking a claim to both intimacy and equality. The letter opens not with a rehearsal of the addressee's secular status but simply 'Bedfellow'. The same term, with further endearments, appears in the signature, 'By your owne true lover and bedfellowe that wold ffayn se you.'²¹⁷

²¹⁶PL:I, No. 418, pp. 665-66 at p. 665.

²¹⁷PRO, SC1/58/71.

vi. Conclusion

In many respects the fifteenth century was a period of change. As we saw in the earlier chapters of the thesis, this century witnessed significant shifts in social organisation. It was a time of technological recovery and innovation, notably in the field of literacy. This century also witnesses one of the most dramatic transitions in medieval British history, the replacement of French by English as the normal mode of communication at all levels of society. Yet despite this, family relationships, as evidenced by correspondence, appear to have remained surprisingly static over the period. In 1500 correspondents made no more effort to compose autograph letters to their family than they had done in 1400; most women remained incapable of making such a gesture. Stylistically, letters continued to be organised around the subject of discussion and the status of the writers, rather than the blood relationship between them. Linguistic and rhetorically, the letters of family members continued to differ only subtly from those exchanged by other correspondents. In 1500 the letters of parents and children were distinguished from those of other writers by the exchange of daily blessing, a convention which is also found in fourteenth century missives, and which probably originated still earlier. By the end of the period different modes of expression do seem to be emerging in the context of marriage. Yet modes of address in most letters continued to recognise the status of the corresponding parties above their relationship, their public role above their domestic persona. Rhetorically too, family letters drew on the same repertoire as the missives of lords and servants, and of knights and their fellows.

CHAPTER FIVE:
DISCOURSES OF INTIMACY IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Material Practices

If the major theme of our study of fifteenth-century correspondence was continuity, then the keynote of the following century is change. The first area in which this is seen is in the material practices of letter-writing. At the close of the fifteenth century we find some indication that handwriting was coming to be regarded as a marker of intimacy, rather than of respect or deference. In the sixteenth century, attitudes towards writing remain difficult to document in detail. However, within the body of material which has survived from this period, the evidence that autography was viewed as an obligation linked to kinship rather than to service relationships emerges much more strongly. The relationship for which the qualitative evidence of change is strongest is marriage. As we saw above, in the fifteenth century most women dictated all their correspondence to clerks or household servants. Though some husbands wrote letters to their wives in their own hands, there is no clear evidence in this period that the use of the autograph was a marked choice; most of the men who wrote to spouses in their own hands conduct all their correspondence in this fashion.

In the sixteenth century changes can be traced in both of these areas. First, from the middle of the sixteenth century we begin to find clear statements from wives that they expected their husbands to write letters to them in their own hands. In 1539, for example, Lady Honor Lisle requested that her husband write to her 'of secret thynges' in his own hand noting that two lines in his own writing 'shuld be more comfort to me than a hundred of a nother mans hand'.¹ Some fifty years later, Joan Thynne received a letter from her husband written in a secretary's hand. So unusual was this event that she was prompted to ask him to write again 'yourself', to reassure her of his state of health.² Maria Thynne, Joan's daughter-in-law, was equally hostile

¹PRO, SP3/1/45.

²Alison Wall, ed., *Two Elizabethan Women : Correspondence of Joan and Maria Thynne 1575-1611*, Wiltshire Record Society 38 (1982), No. 9, p. 4.

to the practice of dictation:

If your leisure will not serve, good sweet, cause Exall to write in his owne name.. I like not his writing in your name for it is as though thou were angry.³

In the letters of husbands a similar concern is also sometimes discernable. Though he complained that 'wrytting to me is somewhat tedious and paynefull', we have evidence that Henry VIII wrote to at least three of his wives in his own hand.⁴ When tired after a long journey, the Earl of Shrewsbury took the trouble to 'screble' a few lines, informing his wife of his safe arrival.⁵ Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of the value placed on the hand is the long autograph letters which George, second Earl of Cumberland, wrote to his wife on his deathbed, asking her forgiveness for his past behaviour towards her.⁶

The second change to the late medieval pattern is the significant increase in the number of women writing autograph letters to their husbands. The growth in the proportion of wives writing in their own hands may, in part, reflect the simple increase in literacy among women which we have already noted in this period. Among these letters, however, we find some strong indications that autography was considered a particular ideal in marital letters. In 1579 Dorothy Thynne acceded, apparently with some reluctance, to a request from her husband:

These few lynes have I wrytten my self in satisfienge your desyre, thinkinge yow will iudge tham rather over mutch .. for the playnes of my hande, which I thinke is sutche as yow will scarsly reade. Wherby I also thinke I have discharged my self of great paynes in writinge ...⁷

Above we saw that Joan Thynne, Dorothy's daughter-in-law, expected her husband to write to her in his own hand. It seems, however, that she felt herself to be under a similar obligation.

³Ibid, No. 48, pp. 32-33 at p. 33.

⁴BL, MS Additional 19398, f. 644; Henry Ellis, ed., *Original Letters Illustrative of English History*, 10 vols. in 3 series (London, 1824-46), 1:II, No. CXLVIII, p. 130; J. O. Halliwell, *Letter of the Kings of England:I*, pp. 297-320, 353.

⁵J. Hunter, *Hallamshire*, revised and enlarged by A. Gatty (London, 1869), pp. 111-12.

⁶George C. Williamson, *Lady Anne Clifford, Her Life, Letters and Work* (Kendal, 1922), pp. 32-33.

⁷BL, Microfilm 904/1, vol. 1, f. 231.

In 1580 she writes:

Thes are to certifie you that I came to London this present Sondag at iij of the clock. I did endure my jorney verie well but was werie at night wherefor I hope you will pardon me because I did not wright my selfe...⁸

At higher social levels too, women appear to have gone to some trouble to pen their own letters. Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury always wrote letters to her husband in her own distinctive, scrawling hand. In the postscript to a letter written in the 1580s she draws particular attention to this habit, writing, 'Bare swete harte with my blotynge; of late I have yused [sic] to wryte letyll with my owne hande, but coulde not now for bayre'.⁹ Though a penwoman of rather limited accomplishment, Queen Anne complied with the request of her husband James I, that she write all her letters to him in her own hand.¹⁰ Though comparatively few in number, these examples suggest that, fifty years before Billingsley pleaded the importance of women writing letters to their husbands in their own hands, autography was already understood as a particular tool of marital intimacy.¹¹

In discussing autography in the fifteenth century, we saw that attitudes toward romantic relationships were influenced by the conventions of 'courtly love', and so, by extension ideas of service. In order to demonstrate that the sixteenth century saw the revival of handwriting as an instrument of familiarity, we must therefore show that it was used not simply in marriage but also in other family relationships. Some evidence to this effect could be adduced in the arena of sibling relations. However, the case is most readily proven in relation to parent-child correspondence. The rise in the use of the autograph in children's letters which is seen in this period is one indication that greater emphasis was now being placed on the personal hand in familiar correspondence. This change could, however, reflect other concerns. As we have seen, attitudes towards literacy shifted markedly over the sixteenth century; appeals to children to

⁸BL, Microfilm 904/2, vol. 5, f. 23.

⁹Lambeth Palace Library, MS Talbot 3205, f. 73.

¹⁰M. Sanders, *Intimate Letters of England's Queens* (London, 1957), p. 88.

¹¹Martin Billingsley, *The Pen's Excellencie or the Secretaries Delight* (London, 1618), unpaginated C3-3v

write 'at the least to exercise your hand' suggest that in some cases children's autography was a demonstration of educational progress rather than emotional commitment.¹² Another possibility is that children's composition of autograph letters is an extension of the fifteenth-century practice, in which use of the hand was a gesture of respect to an addressee of higher social standing. Expressions such as the following, written by Lucy St John to her father, Lord Burghley in 1588, could certainly be interpreted in this fashion:

my duty most humbly remembrede, being loathe to aquainte your Lordeshippe with this my bade writiynge but rather then I wolde be condemned to be vnmyndefull of my duty I rather chuse to be thoughte unskillfull...¹³

If the autograph continued to express not affection, but service or deference, we would not however, expect to see any particular change in parental letters in the sixteenth century. Lords and masters continued to send dictated letters to their inferiors in this period; the letters of parents should follow the same pattern. This is not what we find in practice. Royal correspondents are a group whose letters were generally written by clerks or secretaries; as we saw in chapter four above, none of Henry IV's letters to his children are autograph. From the turn of the century, however, royal parents seem frequently to take the task of writing letters to children upon themselves. In the first decade of the century Margaret Beaufort wrote two holograph letters to her son Henry VII.¹⁴ No letters survive to show whether Henry VII or Henry VIII penned autograph letters to their own offspring. However, Catherine Parr wrote letters to her royal stepchildren in her own hand.¹⁵ James I and Queen Anne also appear consistently to have eschewed the services of secretaries when writing to their children.¹⁶

¹²Thomas Wyatt's instruction to his son in a letter of 1537. Kenneth Muir, *Life and Letters of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Liverpool, 1963), p. 43. For other examples see BL, MS Sloane 1584, f. 30r.; PRO, SP3/1/55; BL, MS Cotton Vespasian F. XIII, f. 140.

¹³BL, MS Lansdowne 104, f. 175.

¹⁴Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 1:I, No. XXII; M. A. E. Wood, ed. *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies of Great Britain*, 3 vols. (London, 1846):I, Letter XLVIII, pp. 118-20.

¹⁵Wood, ed., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies*:III, Letter LXXXIV, pp. 180-82; J. O. Halliwell, *Letters of the Kings of England*, 2 vols. (London, 1846):I, p. 13.

¹⁶Halliwell, *Letters of the Kings of England*:II, pp. 102-06, Sanders, *Intimate Letters of England's Queens*, pp. 90-95; Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 1:I, No. CCXLIV, pp. 80-81.

The royal arena might perhaps be considered exceptional; James I and Catherine Parr were both known for their educational accomplishment, for example, and this might explain their willingness to pen their own missives. However, many parents who wrote autograph letters to their children in the sixteenth century were not particularly skilful writers: it seems unlikely in these cases that the selection of the autograph was the product of pragmatism. As we have seen, Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury was a poor writer who often used secretaries, yet the letters which she wrote to her daughter are all in her own hand. The letters of Lady Anne Fytton to her daughter are highly unorthodox in orthography.¹⁷ In one example she urges her, for example, ‘bee waer how you take pheseck.’ This suggests that the writer was not in the habit of writing all her letters herself, but had made a particular effort in this instance. A third example is Lettice, Countess of Leicester. This writer had a secretariat at her disposal, yet she too, invariably penned the letters which she sent to her son, the Earl of Essex, herself.¹⁸ In a small number of letters more direct evidence of the intention of writers can be found. In the case of Gertrude, Marchioness of Exeter, the supposition that autography was chosen because it was understood as the appropriate ‘familiar’ mode is supported by internal evidence.¹⁹ Five months after reproaching her son for failing to write ‘with your own hand to your own mother’²⁰ she herself went to heroic lengths to produce an autograph missive, closing:

I will bid you farewell, for I am at this present so pained with the cholic and the stone that I have much ado to write; fearing you cannot read this ill written letter.²¹

A similar commitment to autography is evident in the letters of another mother writing at the beginning of the following century. In the 1620s Lady Katherine Paston wrote to her son:

My good child I could haue hardly written to the at this time, but I am lothe to

¹⁷Lady Newdigate-Newdegate, *Gossip from a Muniment Room* (London, 1897), pp. 17-18 and 40

¹⁸James Daybell, ‘Women’s Letters and Letter-Writing in England, 1540-1603: An Introduction to the Issues of Authorship and Construction’, *Shakespeare Studies* 27 (1999), pp. 161-85 at pp.178-79.

¹⁹Wood, ed., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies:III*, Letters CXLIII-CXCLVI, pp. 301-09.

²⁰*Ibid:III*, Letter CXLIII, pp. 303-04 at p.303.

²¹*Ibid:III*, Letter CXLVI, pp. 307-09 at pp. 308-09.

desceive thy expectation for I imagine thow desirest to heer forme [sic] me ...²²

In all these cases the writer lacks any clear status motive for using the autograph; all the addressees are either equal or lower in station than their parents. Though evidence does not always survive to demonstrate this conclusively, it also seems likely that these correspondents would have dictated at least some of their other correspondence. The use of the autograph seems to reflect the desire to express a particular sentiment, to express intimacy or affection through the action of 'taking pains' to write in one's own hand. Though the use of the autograph in family letters was not universal by the sixteenth century, it seems clear that by this date the personal hand had come to represent a particular kind of intimacy, which was associated with the family context.

The Language of Kinship

i. Marriage

Just as the sixteenth century was a period of change in the material aspects of letter-writing, so too it seems to mark a transition in the linguistic organisation of close kinship. The relationship in which this change becomes both soonest and most fully apparent is marriage. Letters between spouses are comparatively rare throughout our period. For the years between 1542 and 1552, however, we have good evidence for one particular marriage. The letters of Sabine and John Johnson, a socially aspirant couple of mercantile status, differ strongly from those of the gentry of the preceding century. The first area in which this is evident is the way in which kinship is treated in relation to status. John Johnson addresses peers and contemporaries as 'Ryght wurshipfull' or 'Jentyll Mistris Baynham'.²³ In the context of the married relationship, however, status terms such as 'reverent' or 'worshipful', and titles such as 'Mistris' do not occur; both partners instead favour simple formulae such as 'welbelovid

²²Ruth Hughey, ed., *The Correspondence of Lady Katherine Paston, 1603-1627*, Norfolk Record Society 14 (1941), No. 63, p. 87.

²³Barbara Winchester, ed., 'The Johnson Letters (1542-1552)', 4 vols., unpublished DPhil Thesis, University of London (1953):II, Nos. 37 and 131, pp. 65 and 260.

husband' or 'loving friend'. As we saw above, 'welbeloved' often betokens condescension, or lack of status on the part of an addressee. The one place in which social dignity is mentioned suggests that the eschewal of such terms here has different motives. In one letter, written on 15 November 1545, John Johnson abandons his usual mode of address, adopting instead the apparently more respectful formula 'Mistris Sabyne'. However, the postscript of the letter suggests that the change was intended not as a compliment, but rather as a rebuke, as a temporary withdrawal of love and approval:

Farewell and goodnyght, wif. I had almoest sayd good wyf, but that it were synne to lye, as ye knowe; nevertheless my hope is that old fachons wil be lefte, and then if I wil not saie good wyf I shal be wourthie to be called lyar.²⁴

This interpretation seems confirmed by Sabine's response:

In moest loving wise, welbeloved husband (master I shold saye because yet doyth becom me baetter to call you master than to call me mystres), your letter of 15 of this present I have receyved this day ...²⁵

In this relationship status terms are avoided neither for reasons of social condescension nor from carelessness. Rather, like Thomas Stonor, this couple seem to construct their relationship as one in which the terms of social respect are unnatural, a violation of marital intimacy.

This sense of marital intimacy is strongly reinforced by other linguistic features of the letters. A strong sense of intimacy, or familiarity is indicated on a number of levels. The first, and most obvious sign of affection, is the manner in which the writers discuss family matters. Both writers refer to their children lovingly as 'our ij jewellis', 'my ij maydens', 'your lytel ons', and Sabine sends regular news to her husband of the girls' illnesses, and of the progress of her own pregnancies.²⁶ The same tone is seen in the news of the writers' welfare, which in earlier letters is often curt and formulaic. In the close of one letter John writes 'going to bed at x of the clocke at nyght, and wold ye were in my bed to tary me'.²⁷ Four days later Sabine writes:

²⁴Ibid.:II, No. 261, pp. 481-82.

²⁵Ibid.:II, No. 280, p. 515.

²⁶For pregnancy, see *ibid.*:III, No. 378, p. 673.

²⁷Ibid.:II, No. 249, p. 465.

I am glad to here that I dyd plesse you so well at your last beng hom, prayng to the Lord to geve me grase that I may doy allwaes so; and whereas you do wysse yourselfe at hom (I wold no lese), and desyryng you moest harteley to com whom as sone as you can, and kepe yourselfe well, good husband.²⁸

Familiarity is also suggested by the jocular tone of many of these letters. In November 1545, for example, John replied flippantly to Sabine's wish that he be spared by the plague which was raging in Calais:

if ther were in this towne no m[ore] men lefte but I, the women of this towne wold kepe me perfo[rce] from you, and then ye were never the better. By Saint Mary, I shuld have mucche ado to please so many women! God save me from being trowbled with many women, for I have moche ado to please you allone, as ye knowe!²⁹

In May of the same year Sabine wrote with similar levity:

I have had an empedymment this iiij dayes that many wold have thaer wives to have it all the year: for iiij dayes I cold not spake, it cam with a cold.³⁰

The marriage of the Johnsons is not organised in the language of respect and duty, used in society more generally, but is based on a vocabulary of personal sentiment and private reference.

Though extensive, the correspondence of one couple is too little evidence on which to construct a general pattern. For the group standing immediately above the Johnsons on the social ladder, the 'gentry' understood in its broadest sense, a slightly greater range of evidence survives. These missives show slightly different conventions to the Johnson Letters. First, unlike Sabine Johnson, wives at this social level continue to structure their letters along similar lines to their fifteenth-century predecessors. For example, Christian Thynne, wife of a Wiltshire gentleman addresses her husband not 'Right worshipful Sir', but by the sixteenth-century equivalent of that style, 'Mr Thynne'.³¹ Second, though husbands now use more informal, affectionate modes of

²⁸Ibid.:II, No. 258, p. 478.

²⁹Ibid.:II, No. 268, p. 494.

³⁰Ibid.:II, No. 155, p. 303.

³¹BL, Microfilm 904/1, vol. 1, f. 133. Less than a decade later, Margaret Gresham, wife of a clerk in the Royal Auditor's office, writes with evident concern, but equal formality: 'M. Gresham I hartely recommend me unto yow this be to let yow understaund that I have resaevid yowr letter'. PRO, SP46/58/255; SP46/58/262-63. See also

expression, the conventions used resemble those seen in late-fifteenth century letters, rather than those found in the correspondence of John Johnson. Among this group, for example, Thomas Stonor's practise of using the first name in salutations has become widespread.³² Several writers now follow Robert Plumpton by using affectionate epithets, such as 'Sweet heart'.³³ Some writers extend the tropes of intimacy still further. Particularly striking is the series of letters which William St Loe wrote to his wife in the 1560s. These missives not only abound in declarations of affection and playful epithets ('myne owne', 'swetehart', 'sweete Besse'), they also show a violation of etiquette as decisive and as radical as Thomas Stonor's use of the term 'lemman'.³⁴ In a number of letters we find sentences such as the following:

I pray the as thow doest love me, lett me schortlye heare form the, for the quyetyng off my unquyetyd mynde, howe thy owne swete seylff wyth all thyne doeth.³⁵

As we saw earlier, it was not the practice of the aristocracy to use the familiar pronoun 'thou' even when speaking to their own children. Yet neither contempt nor social condescension seem to be probable motives for the selection of this form here. Rather, as in the Johnson letters, the aim appears to be to describe the marital relationship in terms which distinguish it from other forms of social intercourse. 'Thou' indicates not contempt, but rather the particular intimacy associated with this type of relationship.

The group for whom the greatest quantity of evidence survives for this period is the most socially elevated, the aristocracy. As we saw earlier, the few letters between a husband and a

Dousabella Lady Darcy in Wood, ed. *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies:II*, Letter CXLIV, pp. 350-52.

³²Mary A. Welch, ed., 'Willoughby Letters of the first half of the Sixteenth Century', in *Thoroton Society Record Series 24* (1967), pp. 1-98: No. 5, pp.19-20 at p. 19; Elizabeth Rogers, ed., *Correspondence of Sir Thomas More* (Princeton, 1947), p. 174; T. D. Whitaker, *A General History of the County of York*, 2 vols. (London, 1821):I, p. 289; BL, Microfilm 904/1, vol. 1, ff. 134-35, 139 and 146.

³³PRO, SP1/85/220 [Printed in St Clare Byrne, ed., *Lisle Letters:II*, p. 353.] See also William St Loe in Hunter, *Hallamshire*, p. 108.

³⁴*Ibid.* The letters are not dated, but appear to have been written in the 1560s.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 108.

wife of noble status surviving for the fifteenth century conformed broadly to the pattern set by contemporary gentry correspondence; Lora, Countess of Ormonde addressed her husband respectfully, occasionally using terms found in petitionary contexts. The letters of most noble couples in the mid sixteenth century continue to follow this model. In 1534 Lady Elizabeth Dacres wrote to her husband communicating news of the safe delivery of their child; though the paragraph ends on the comparatively informal note 'your little ones is in good health', the opening is highly formal, almost writ-like in style:

Please it your lordship to be advertised, that upon AshWednesday afternoon it pleased Almighty God, of his mercy, to send me deliverance of a daughter.³⁶

In 1553 Grace, Countess of Shrewsbury begins a letter to her husband in similar style:

My lord, After my most hearty and humble commendations unto your good lordship, you shall understand that I have received yours by Batemen, wherein I perceive that your lordship is in health.³⁷

Though these ladies do not write 'curial prose' in the narrow sense, their letters show certain characteristics of this style; they clearly occupy the more formal end of the contemporary spectrum.

Letters written by royal wives in the same period display similar features. In 1513 Catherine of Aragon addressed her husband correctly, in terms which might be used by any courtier:

My Lord Howard hath sent me a Lettre open to *your Grace*, within oon of myn, by the whiche ye shal see at length the grete Victorye that our Lord hath sent your subgetts in your absence; and for this cause is noo nede herin to trouble *your Grace* with long writing ...³⁸

Henry's last wife, Catherine Parr, had enjoyed a humanist education. Her writing style is not as close to that of legal documents as that of Catherine of Aragon or Henry's other wives. Yet the tone remains unmistakeably formal. As in her predecessor's letter, the emphasis is on the writer's identity as subject rather than as spouse. In 1544 she writes, for example:

³⁶Wood, ed., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies*:II, No. LIV, pp. 124-29 at p. 126.

³⁷Wood, *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies*:III, Letter CXXV, pp. 269-70 at p. 269.

³⁸Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 1:I, No. XXXII, p. 88.

Even such confidence have I in your majesty's gentleness, knowing myself never to have done my duty as were requisite and meet for such a noble prince, at whose hands I have found and received so much love and goodness.³⁹

For the fifteenth century we have only one letter from a noble husband to his wife. For the mid-sixteenth century, however, slightly more evidence has survived. These letters suggest that, while gentry husbands might dispense with the norms of social etiquette when writing to their wives, for the nobility the recognition of rank remained of pre-eminent importance. The clearest example of this is seen in the letters of Thomas Seymour, Baron of Sudeley to his wife Catherine, dowager Queen of England. Like Lady Dacres and the Countess of Shrewsbury, Catherine addressed her husband formally by the title 'my lord', and observed the decorum of wifely deference, signing 'by your humble, true, and loving wife in her heart'.⁴⁰ In the letters of her husband, however, Catherine is treated not as the inferior which her gender made her, but as the social superior which she had become by her previous illustrious marriage:

If I knew by what mean I might gratify your highness of your goodness to me, shewed at our last lodging together, I should not be slack to declare mine lady again, and to that intent that I might be more bound unto your highness, that once in three days I might receive three lines in a letter from you, and as many lines and letters more as shall seem good unto your highness.⁴¹

The letter written by Henry Radclyf, Earl of Sussex in 1547 is probably more broadly representative of relationships at this status level. In the opening salutation, 'Madame with most lovyng and hertie commendacions' he strikes a balance between affection and respect similar to that seen in the letters of noble wives. In the conclusion, the emphasis is perhaps more on the personal and affective than the public:

Thus, good Madame albeit the contents of your Lettres diverslie at length,

³⁹ Anne Crawford, ed., *Letters of the Queens of England 1100-1547* (Stroud, 1994), p. 218 The same writer habitually signs herself as her husband's 'humble loving wife and *servant*' (Ibid., pp. 216-18). Letters from Anne Boleyn to Henry, quoted by both Wood and Strickland, are now believed to be forgeries written in the Elizabethan period: Retha M. Warnicke, 'Three forged Letters of Anne Boleyn: Their Implications for Reformation Politics and Women's Studies', *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association* 2 (1990): 33-48. However, see also Anne of Cleves's letter to Henry in Wood, ed., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies: III*, Letter LXXIII, pp. 160-62.

⁴⁰ Anne Crawford, ed., *Letters of the Queens of England* (Stroud, 1994), pp. 221-23.

⁴¹ Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England*, 6 vols. (Revised edition, London, 1864):II, pp. 447-48.

tending to the lak of good wil in me that ought to be in a lovyng husband; the same nevertheles as I think proceding of a good hert might otherwise have bin qualified I wisse to you my owne hert as to my self.⁴²

In the main body of the letter, however, the tone is highly formal. As in the fifteenth-century letters of the nobility, the prose style is portentous and elaborate, with emphasis on repetition and cohesion:

For my oone matiers hetherto, thorough the *gret and diligent* busines that my lord Chauncleor hath had, I could espye no tyme mete to the purposos, but shal nevertheless as sone as oportunitie may serve set forth *the same*.⁴³

As before, the language used to the wife is peremptory, resembling that which might be directed to a servant or retainer:

And for your repaire hether in th'end of this weke I shall send unto you Henry Northey, by whom you shal knowe *my determynat pleasur*. In the meane tyme *I require you* to put all soch things in order as shalbe mete for you here.⁴⁴

Not all letters by correspondents of this status conform to this model, however. The largest collection of letters between a husband and wife of noble status is found amongst the Lisle Papers. These missives are very different in character to those examined to this point, resembling the letters of Thomas Stonor more closely than they do those of Thomas Seymour. Indeed, the letters of Arthur Plantagenet, Viscount Lisle, surpass even the former in the intimacy of their language. For example, rather than addressing his wife as 'Madam' or 'Lady', as did the majority of his contemporaries, Arthur uses salutations which emphasize the special nature of the relationship: 'Gentill Bedfellowe'; 'Good mine own'; 'My very heart root'. In the explicit contents of the letters too, status is represented as a consideration which is secondary to sentiment. In a letter of 1538 he writes 'thus fare yow as hartly well to fare as ever gentyll woman dyd', but continues:

and further I pray yow to take hit as well as ever woman dyd from hir husband or lover. For my parte I neuer louyd none soo well neither thowght so longe for

⁴²Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series I:II, No. CLV, pp. 137-38 at p. 138.

⁴³Ibid., p.138.

⁴⁴Ibid., p.138.

none sens I know a woman, as God knowyth...⁴⁵

In another he further undermines, or rather reverses, the status hierarchies which usually obtained between husband and wife:

praying you to send me no money to you com home your selffe, for whome I do asmoche longe for as dothe the child for his norse, and that knowthe God...⁴⁶

Rather than constructing this relationship in the language of service, Arthur Plantagenet invokes ideas of the private realm, where public authority has no influence.

The letters of Lord Lisle diverge from those of other nobles of the time. Though those of Lady Lisle are less unequivocal in their use of private imagery, they also contrast starkly with the letters of other high-born wives examined to this point. Unlike her husband, Honor does not entirely eschew status terms; in one letter she salutes Arthur 'My own good Lord' in another 'My own sweet good Lord'.⁴⁷ At other times, however, rank is firmly sidelined; opening formulae used by Honor include 'Good swete harte', 'Good mine own' or 'Gentle Bedfellow'.⁴⁸ The same balance between intimacy and formality can be seen in the body of the letters. Occasionally Honor adopts a public discursive style. In a missive of 1538 she writes, for example:

I beseche your Lordship to bee good Lord to Asheton þe gunner for I assure you hee is an honest man and I thinke he lovythe your Lordship as well as any man in Callais.⁴⁹

This closely resembles the language of a letter which the same correspondent had sent to Thomas Cromwell five years earlier:

Sir, I beseech you, know thoroughly the matter; then I am sure pity will move

⁴⁵PRO, SP3/1/3. [Byrne, ed., *Lisle Letters*:V, No. 1268, pp. 280-81.]

⁴⁶PRO, SP3/1/2. [Byrne, ed., *Lisle Letters*:V, No. 1292, pp. 313-14.]

⁴⁷Byrne, ed., *Lisle Letters*:V, Nos. 1263 and 1270, pp. 275 and 283. However, the substitution of the qualifiers 'good' and 'sweet' for the conventional 'noble' or 'right honourable' itself suggests a less particular concern for etiquette than that shown by the Lisles' servants and noble peers.

⁴⁸Byrne, ed., *Lisle Letters*:V, Nos. 1551, 1269 and 1281, pp. 658, 282 and 300.

⁴⁹PRO, SP3/1/32.

you to be good master unto this honest man.⁵⁰

However, as we saw earlier, style in letters is sometimes dictated by topic rather than by the relations of the writers; here it seems likely that the rhetoric of service is evoked by the 'public' nature of the request. In most cases Honor's letters stand out in their avoidance of the gestures usually associated with public discourse. One striking omission from most of these letters, for example, is the circumlocution 'your lordship', which correspondents less intimate with the addressee approach Lord Lisle. A similar defiance of polite norms can be seen in the explicit contents of the letters. Where gentry wives express affection obliquely, presumably to avoid violating norms of deference, Honor's rhetoric is both expansive and categorical. In the final section of one letter she protests, for example:

I trust you shall not ffynde me slack but shall well knowe me to usse suche delygens as one sholde do whosse hoolle hertt and mynde wyll neuer be settlyd nor stablished tyll the body be retornyd unto you.⁵¹

In this period the Lord and Lady Lisle differ from the majority in the way in which they organise their epistolary discourse. They do not stand entirely alone, however. One analogue for this more intimate style of marital correspondence is found among the Clifford letters. The only surviving letter from Eleanor, Countess of Cumberland dates from the 1540s. Like Honor Lisle, this writer greets her husband not 'My Lord', but rather 'Dear Heart'.⁵² Another correspondent whose letters fall into this more familiar category is Lord Lisle's step-nephew, Henry VIII. Some of the love letters sent by Henry to Anne Boleyn in the period preceding his divorce conform to the conventions of courtly love:

Although, my mistress, it has not pleased you to remember the promise you made me when I was last with you ... yet it seems to me that it belongs to a true servant (seeing that otherwise he can know nothing) to inquire the health of his mistress, and to acquit myself of the duty of a true servant...⁵³

As we have seen, this discourse is itself grounded in the language of 'loving lordship'. Though

⁵⁰Byrne, ed., *Lisle Letters*:I, No. 57, pp. 577-78 at p. 578.

⁵¹PRO, SP3/1/38 [Byrne, ed., *Lisle Letters*:V, No. 1264, pp. 275-76].

⁵²A. G. Dickens, ed., *Clifford Letters of the Sixteenth Century*, Surtees Society 172 (1957), No. 44, p. 126.

⁵³Halliwell, ed., *Letters of the Kings of England*:I, pp. 310-11.

'romantic', these letters are not therefore significantly different to those which John Paston III wrote to his 'unknown lady' half a century earlier. In other letters, however, the tone is rather less decorous:

Mine own sweetheart, this shall be to advertise you of the great elengeness that I find here since your departing ... wishing myself (especially an evening) in my sweetheart's arms, whose pretty dukkys I trust shortly to cusse.⁵⁴

So extreme is the eschewal of status in favour of familiarity seen in this passage that there is a temptation to attribute it to the unusual circumstances of the couple. Similar features can, however, be seen in the fragmentary records of Henry's relations with his other wives. In 1544, for example, Henry VIII addressed Catherine Parr by the term which his step-uncle Arthur Plantagenet, favoured at the same period:

No more to yow att thys tyme, *swethart* bothe for lacke of tyme and grett occupation off bysynes, savyng we pray yow to gyff in our name our harte blessingys to all our chyldren...⁵⁵

Equally significant, in the history of familiar epistolarity, is the opening sentence of the single surviving letter from Henry to Jane Seymour:

The bearer of these few lines from thy entirely devoted servant will deliver into thy fair hands a token of my true affection for thee, hoping you will keep it for ever in your sincere love for me.⁵⁶

Though Jane Seymour was a servant in the royal household, and of much lower social status than her admirer, condescension seems an unlikely reason for choosing the informal second-person pronoun here.⁵⁷ Rather, as in the letters of William St Loe, the switch to the intimate form seems to symbolise a rejection of the ordinary social conventions. It indicates a desire to conduct the relationship according to 'private' rules, rather than the 'public' dictates of etiquette.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 318-19.

⁵⁵Ellis, ed., *Original Letters*, series 1:II, No. CXLVIII, p. 130.

⁵⁶Halliwell, ed., *Letters of the Kings of England*:I, p. 353.

⁵⁷This suspicion is reinforced by reversion to the more respectful form 'you' at the end of the sentence.

It is perhaps tempting to see Henry VIII as a special case. It does not seem improbable that a man so uxorious should have a radically different style of writing to his wives. By the final quarter of the century, however, it is the conventions of Henry and his step uncle, Lord Lisle which dominate in the correspondence of husbands of all ranks. By this period many husbands follow Henry and Arthur in saluting their wives by terms of endearment such as 'Swet heart', while others either use diminutives of their wives' names, or combinations of the two forms, such as 'Swete Megge' or 'Swet Mall'.⁵⁸ Indeed, exceptions to this pattern tend only to reinforce the impression of change: Sir George Carey and John Thynne stand apart in addressing their wives not by name, but by the joking, and apparently affectionate nickname, 'pugge'.⁵⁹

In the final quarter of the century we find another trait which indicates the growth of a language of sentiment at the expense of the earlier emphasis on status. From 1570 onwards a high proportion of husbands begin to use the informal second-person pronoun 'thou', apparently as a gesture of particular affection. John Thynne concludes a letter otherwise written in the polite 'you' with the following sentimental declaration: 'And ever live to love thee more and more, I protest I now only live to be with thee'.⁶⁰ Other writers compose entire missives in this mode. Sir Thomas Baskerville wrote a number of letters in this form. A typical example begins:

Swet Mall I thanke thee for thy letter for I longid exceedingly to hear from thee.
The very same discontents thou haste for my nott being with thee I feele, and
wisse it in me to remedye.⁶¹

The final shift, and that which is perhaps most suggestive of changing attitudes, is a growing

⁵⁸P. R. Seddon, ed., *Letters of John Holles, 1587-1637*, 3 vols. Thoroton Society 31, 35-36 (1975-86):II, Nos. 439-43, pp. 323-28; BL, MS Additional 23212, f. 5; George C. Williamson, *Lady Anne Clifford: Her Life, Letters and Work* (Kendal, 1922), pp. 25-28; Hunter, *Hallamshire*, pp. 108-112; BL, MS Harley 4762, Nos. 5-6, 13-16, 19, 34, 38; Wall, ed., *Two Elizabethan Women*, No. 65, pp. 50-51.

⁵⁹Isaac Herbert Jeayes, ed., *Descriptive Catalogue of the Charters and Muniments in the Possession of Rt Hon. Lord Fitzhardinge at Berkeley Castle* (Bristol, 1892), p. 330; Wall, ed., *Two Elizabethan Women*, Nos. 27 and 30, pp. 17-18 and p. 20. For the affectionate or playful connotation of the term see *OED*, pug (n.2)

⁶⁰Wall, ed., *Two Elizabethan Women*, No. 27, pp. 17-18 at p.18. His son Thomas moves between the two forms in the one surviving letter to his wife. *Ibid.*, No. 65, pp. 50-51.

⁶¹BL, MS Harley 4762, No. 34. Other examples are Jeayes, ed., *Charters and Muniments at Berkeley Castle*, p. 330; George C. Williamson, *Lady Anne Clifford: Her Life, Letters and Work* (Kendal, 1922), pp. 25-28; HMC, *Report on the Manuscripts of Lord Middleton preserved at Woollaton Hall, Nottinghamshire* (1911), pp. 557-60.

tendency to use explicitly sentimental rhetoric. As we see in the quotations offered above, this is often linked to the use of the informal pronoun. It can also be seen, however, in letters which adhere to the more correct form of address. In 1568, for example, the Earl of Shrewsbury assures his Countess:

My dere none, me thynke tyme longar synste my cumminge heddar withoute you mo only joye, than I dyd synste I meryed you: such us faythefull affecsyon, whyche I nevar tasted so deply before.⁶²

By the seventeenth century use of the second-person pronoun has become still more common.⁶³

This practise is followed, for example, by both Charles I and his nemesis, Oliver Cromwell.⁶⁴ Meanwhile the practice of addressing one's wife by affectionate names or epithets had become practically universal.⁶⁵

The trajectory of epistolary conventions in the letters of wives is similar to that of husbands. The chronology, however, is slightly different. By the 1570s most husbands had abandoned the formal modes of expression which characterised fifteenth-century marital letters. However, at the same date most women of gentry status continued to adhere to conservative formulae when addressing their husbands. Thus where John Thynne wrote to his wife 'My good Pug', Joan responded with the respectful salutations 'Good Mr Thynne' and 'My good husband'.⁶⁶ Though he addressed her simply as 'Besse', Elizabeth Bourne begins the only surviving letter

⁶²Hunter, *Hallamshire*, p. 109.

⁶³D. Townshend, *The Life and Letters of Mr Endymion Porter* (London, 1897), pp. 14, 17-21; Bertram Schofield, ed., *The Knyvett Letters (1620-1644)*, Norfolk Record Society 20 (1949), *passim*; D. Gardiner, ed., *The Oxinden and Peyton Letters 1642-1670* (London, 1937), p. 154.

⁶⁴'My Dearest .. I could chide thee that in many of thy letters thou writest to me, that I should not be unmindful of thee and thy little ones.' S.C. Lomas, ed., *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell with elucidations by Thomas Carlyle*, 3 vols. (London, 1904): II, No. CXLIII, p. 114; 'Dear heart,...I know thou canst not doubt of my perfect, real, and unchangeable love to thee'. Halliwell, ed., *Letters of the Kings of England:II*, p. 425. See also pp. 355-382 *inter alia*.

⁶⁵Halliwell, ed., *Letters of the Kings of England:II*, pp. 106-07; Gardiner, ed., *Oxinden Letters*, pp. 129-30; HMC, *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Marquis of Bath at Longleat*, 5 vols (London, 1904-68):IV, p. 217

⁶⁶Wall, ed., *Two Elizabethan Women*, Nos. 1-3, 5-12 *inter alia*. John writes to Joan as 'pug' in Nos. 27 and 30, pp. 17-18 and 20.

to her husband 'Mr Bourne'.⁶⁷ The evidence of noble wives from this period is more fragmentary; it is more difficult to gain a general picture of practices at this level of society. What is clear, however, is that there had been no general shift to more 'private' modes of expression among women by this date. For example, the conclusion of a letter from the Countess of Northumberland to her husband, written in 1571, differs little from mid-century texts either in its style, or in its insistence on correct social titles:

And so referring your Lordship for further declaration to the credite of the bearer .. I ende commytting your good Lordship to the custodie and protection of the Almightye, who sende you perfect healthe, with the enjoying of your hart's desire.⁶⁸

Most women writing in the 1570s and 1580s continued to refer to their husbands in title, just as their predecessors had done in the fifteenth century. However, in some of these letters a certain shift can, perhaps, be perceived in the rhetoric of letters. In other letters, however, subtle differences can be seen. Just as husbands' letters develop the more particularised rhetorical aspects seen in the missives of their gentle predecessors, so wives' letters extend the domestic and affective emphasis of their contents. Like Margaret Paston, Joan Thynne wrote letters full of estate business and commissions for household purchases. However, while Margaret's letters refer infrequently and in unsentimental terms to her children, Joan mentions them affectionately and often. The closing paragraph of a letter of 1595 reads, for example:

Your children I prase God are all well and Doll was in hope her father had byn hom when Mores com and when she sawe you not shee criede out and now she desires your blessinge for her selfe and her sister.⁶⁹

In many of these letters we see touches which recall the bantering intimacy of the Johnsons, or the familiarity of the Lises. At a moment of strain, occasioned by their son's clandestine

⁶⁷BL, MS Additional 23212, f. 3; See also J. H. Bettey, ed., *Calendar of the Correspondence of the Smyth Family of Ashton Court, 1548-1642*, Bristol Record Society 35 (1982), No. 81, p. 40; Jane Key, ed., 'The letters and will of Lady Dorothy Bacon', in *Norfolk Record Society* 56 (1993), pp. 77-112 at pp. 85-87; British Library, Microfilm 904/1, vol. 1, f. 231; Alice T. Friedman, 'Portrait of a Marriage: the Willoughby Letters of 1585-1586', *Signs* 11 (1986): 542-555, pp. 550 and 554; PRO, SP46/607-10.

⁶⁸William Murdin, ed., *A Collection of State Papers relating to Affairs in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1759), p. 188; See also a letter drafted in the name of Lady Oxford in BL, MS Lansdowne 104, ff. 164-67.

⁶⁹BL, Microfilm 904/2, vol 5, f. 82.

marriage, Joan protests:

My loue to your selfe is such not to be broken by kniveis or any thinge els
whilst I lyve ... All thogh the straine be grete for the present, yet I hope our
meteings shall be joyfull to us both...⁷⁰

In these letters there is almost a sense that the conventional modes of expression, the codes of deference to which these wives adhere, impose unnatural constraints on the relationships which they describe. It is as though the older forms strain to accommodate newer themes or ideas about the nature of the married relationship. By the following generation this balance tips; familiar form now accompanies this greater sentimentality in content. Among the nobility this intimate style is most dramatically illustrated by a series of letters written by Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury from the late 1570s onwards. On one occasion this writer opens with a salutation reminiscent of mid-century writers, 'My owne good Lorde'. In her other letters, however, the modes of address used are affectionate rather than socially correct: 'My none', 'My deare harte', 'swete harte'.⁷¹ These missives are also quite informal and unrestrained in their expression of sentiment. In a letter of the late 1580s, for example, she assures the Earl:

I have thought the tyme longe sence your goynge, you have been letyll out of
my mynde ... now I shall longe for Monday and wyll yn the meane tyme and
ever wysse to you as to my owne harte ..⁷²

Among gentry wives equally dramatic changes can be traced. Above we saw that Sir John Thynne's wife Joan always addressed her husband by the dignified and formal title 'Mr Thynne'. Her daughter-in-law Maria followed rather different conventions, however. In response to her husband's salutation 'Good sweet', Maria writes not 'Mr Thynne', but a diminutive form of her husband's Christian name, 'Thomken', often qualified by sentimental epithets such as 'sweet', 'fair', 'best' and 'beloved'.⁷³ Indeed, in one letter she seems almost to mock the conventions of the preceding generation, referring to her husband by the teasing diminutive 'my best little

⁷⁰Ibid., f. 73.

⁷¹Lambeth Palace Library, MS Talbot 3205, ff. 73, 66 and 68.

⁷²Ibid., f. 73. For comparison see the letters of Frances Howard in HMC, *Calendar of the Manuscripts at Longleat*:IV, pp. 153-54, 158, 159-60.

⁷³Wall, ed., *Two Elizabethan Women*, Nos. 48, 51, 52, 63.

Sirrah'. The letters of another gentry wife, also writing in the first decade of the seventeenth century, display very similar conventions. Instead of saluting her husband as 'Sir', Dorothy Gawdy consistently addresses him by a diminutive form of his name as 'Sweet Bass' or 'My dear Bass'.⁷⁴ She also resembles her contemporary in two other respects. First, like Maria, and like many husbands writing in this period, Dorothy addresses her husband not politely, as 'you', but informally, as 'thou'. In 1602 she writes, for example:

My dear Bass, thy absens hath bin longe, wherfore yf thow canst possible I pray thee lett us have thy presens to night ... But that it be not unpossible swet Bass, cum this night. Thy cumpany I protest before God shalbe more pleasing to me then thow canst or willst imagin.⁷⁵

Second, as we see from this passage, Dorothy uses explicitly sentimental rhetoric in her letters to her husband. In Maria's letters this sense of particular, private intimacy can also be found.

An undated letter concludes, for example:

I salute thy best beloved self with the return of thine own wish in thy last letter, and so once more fare ever well, my best and sweetest Thomken, and many thousand times more than these 1 000 000 000 000 000 000 000 000 00 for thy kind wanton letters.⁷⁶

If found in the letters of only three women this trend, though interesting, would be of limited significance. A cursory survey suggests, however, that by the middle of the seventeenth century many of the changes seen here had been quite widely adopted. Though the familiar 'thou' does not become as general among wives as it was among husbands, comparable examples can be found. Around 1629, for example, Florence Smyth wrote to her husband Thomas:

I sat up so long at cards last night with my pa., the Barnit and Mr Bluet that I can scarce se, yet if thou wart in the bed I should kepe my eyes open. I shall looke for thee this day senight acording to your promies [sic].⁷⁷

The other developments characteristic of these letters are, however, very widely paralleled. By

⁷⁴BL, MS Additional 36989, ff. 14-18.

⁷⁵BL, MS Additional 36989, f.18.

⁷⁶Wall, ed., *Two Elizabethan Women*, No. 52, p. 38.

⁷⁷Betty, ed., *Calendar of Smyth Correspondence*, No. 211, p. 99.

The other developments characteristic of these letters are, however, very widely paralleled. By the middle of the seventeenth century diminutives or romantic labels such as 'Dear Heart' have almost entirely displaced 'social' modes of address such 'Sir' or 'Mr' at all levels of society.⁷⁸ Second, as in the letter of Florence Smyth above, these modes of address are now often accompanied by rhetoric which is sentimental rather than deferential in tone.

By the first half of the seventeenth century a surprisingly clear pattern has emerged. At all social levels the language of social status appears to have been marginalised in marriage. Both husbands and wives now express themselves in a sentimental vocabulary, which sharply differentiates their letters from those exchanged by strangers, or by servants and their masters. As concerns marriage, Lawrence Stone's argument that the sixteenth century saw an increase in hierarchy and formality therefore seems wide of the mark. It is not at the turn of seventeenth century that we see the beginnings of a trend towards sentimental rhetoric in the marital relationship, but nearly a hundred years earlier.

ii. Parents and Children

In the fifteenth century, the children of both noble and gentle families wrote to their parents in language imbued with ideas of status. In youth, the role of child was often assimilated to that of servant, with deference and duty emphasised at the expense of affect. In later life, roles might be reversed, as parents acknowledged the worldly station of their children, particularly if this out-ranked their own. At both stages of the life-cycle the tone was formal, the bond of blood subordinated to the public claims of status. The group for whom we have the strongest evidence in the middle of the sixteenth century is the children of the nobility. This correspondence strongly suggests that the values and conventions of the fifteenth century continued to be observed. If, for example, we examine the letters of Henry, lord Clifford to his father, the first

⁷⁸Expressions of this type are used, for example, in the letters of Dorothy Cromwell, Anne Oxinden, Lady Herbert, Lady d'Ewes, the Marchioness of Hertford and the queen, Henrietta Maria. See Lomas, ed., *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*:II, No. CLXIII, pp. 168-69; Gardiner, ed., *Oxinden Letters*, pp. 130-31; W. J. Smith, ed., *Herbert Correspondence* (Cardiff, 1963), Nos. 12 and 13, pp. 24 and 25; HMC, *Calendar of the Manuscripts at Longleat*:IV, p. 219; Sanders, *Intimate Letters of England's Queens*, pp. 89-90 and 98-106.

earl of Cumberland, we find continuity in all three of our categories of analysis: rhetoric, style and lexis. As in the missives which the earls of March and Rutland addressed to their father, the position of the addressee as a lord is noticed with considerably greater emphasis than his status as kinsman; the word 'father' occurs in the subscription and address, but neither in the salutation nor the body of the letters. In the March/Rutland letter the addressee was also appealed to rhetorically as a ruler of the political, rather than of the domestic sphere. In Henry's letter too, it is public concepts of governance which are to the fore:

And also ther was inqere maid at the last sessions at Applebe of a certayn ryott to be comytted and doyn at Overton wich ther wald not be founde and for the ferther examynation therof, I my selfe, the abbott of Shaipe with other gentilmen dyd make ferther inquer as mor playnly doith apper by certayn bylles concernyng the same wich I have sende unto you ... I besuch your lordsheipe that I may knawe wich I shall ever be glade to accompleshe with the grace of Jh[es]u who have your honorable lordsheipe in hys blessed keipyng.⁷⁹

Finally, and perhaps even more emphatically than in fifteenth-century letters, the style here is that associated with official, legal contexts. For example, this passage is rich in devices which promote clarity and cohesion: 'a certyan ryott', 'certayn bylles' 'concernyng the same'. It also displays one example of amplification ('comytted and doyn'), which, as we noted earlier, is also an accepted feature of 'curial' prose style. Very similar traits can be seen in the letters of other writers. In 1527, for example, the sixth Earl of Northumberland wrote to his 'most dere lady and moder' in terms which differ little, either in style or in rhetoric, from those which might be addressed to a non-relative of comparable status:

And wher as y am informyd that ye are proposid to go [to] the erle of Cumbreland, surely madam it shall not stand with you honour so to do.⁸⁰

Mary Lennox and Mary Richmond reproach their fathers in similarly public terms. The former complains, in terms reminiscent of fifteenth century writers, of the 'unnaturalness' and 'unkindness' shown to her by her 'lord'. The latter reproaches 'your grace' for failing to promote her case at court. This lapse is presented as a slight not to the writer as a daughter, but rather as an aristocrat: she marvels that the king should deny her the justice 'than never yet

⁷⁹R. W. Hoyle, ed., 'Letters of the Cliffords, lords Clifford and earls of Cumberland, c. 1500-c. 1565', in *Camden Miscellany* 31, Camden Society 4th series 44 (1992), pp. 1-191, No. 42, p. 87.

⁸⁰Hoyle, ed., 'Letters of the Cliffords', No. 48, pp. 96-97 at p. 96.

was denied to the worst gentywomen in the realme'.⁸¹

Missives sent by noble children to their parents have survived in good number for the first half of the sixteenth century. Evidence of parents writing to children at this social level is, however, quite sparse for this period. From such disparate fragments a general pattern is difficult to reconstruct. A single letter sent by Mary Boleyn, daughter of the Earl of Ormonde, to her son in 1514 seems initially to suggest a growing interest if not in sentiment, then at least in kinship.

The letter opens simply, with no reference to status:

My son Boleyn, I heartily recommend me to you, and I send you God's blessing and mine.⁸²

Another unique survival, a letter written to the Countess of Rutland some three decades later seems to imply the reverse. Her father begins with careful deference:

Madam, evermore Gode's blessynge be with you, with most umbell recommendacons unto my Lorde, whome I truste yet Allmyghty God shall strenght.⁸³

In fact neither of these letters can be taken as typical of relations at this level. Mary Boleyn's style may reflect not affection but condescension; while Mary claimed nobility as her father's coheir, as a simple knight her son was of emphatically lower status. The second example represents the reverse situation: Eleanor, Countess of Rutland's father was Sir William Paston, a member of the famous Norfolk gentry family. The formal, deferential salutation which the father uses probably reflects the meanness of his status in comparison to that of his daughter.

Only four cases can be cited in which parents write to children of equivalent status; the picture which these offer is no less confusing. Though they both appear to have felt considerable affection for their addressees, Catherine Parr and Henry, fifth Earl of Northumberland are

⁸¹Wood, ed., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies*:III, Letter XCVII, pp. 209-12; BL, MS Cotton Vespasian F. XIII, f. 75.

⁸²J. S. Brewer, J. Gairdner and R. Brodie, eds., *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, 21 vols. (London, 1862-1910); vol. 1 revised by R. Brodie (London, 1920):I, No. 5784, p. 977 (c.1514).

⁸³HMC, *The Manuscripts of His Grace the Duke of Rutland*, 4 vols. (London, 1888-1905):I, p. 31.

careful to observe modes of address appropriate to the *status* of their addressees. In a letter offering encouragement to Princess Mary in her endeavour of translating a treatise by Erasmus, the Queen salutes her addressee not as 'daughter' but 'most noble and dearest lady'.⁸⁴ Despite asking solicitously after his daughter, the Earl of Cumberland's 'bedfellow and your little ones', Henry Algernon consistently refers to his addressee as 'my lord', and 'your lordship'.⁸⁵ The two other examples follow a different pattern. The only surviving letter from Catherine of Aragon to her daughter Mary begins neither 'my lady' nor 'princess', but quite simply 'daughter'.⁸⁶ Gertrude, Marchioness of Exeter uses the equivalent style, 'Son', to the Earl of Devonshire.⁸⁷ In this series of letters the perception that the writer intends to eschew the 'public values' which dominate earlier letters is also supported by reference to style and rhetoric. By contrast to the letters of noble children, these missives contain few signs of stylistic elevation; for the most part sentences are short and loosely connected, vocabulary simple and unelaborated. Rhetorically, though we find occasional references to 'duty', other aspects of the language of service, such as appeals to 'naturalness', 'kindness' or 'tenderness' are largely absent. Instead of this we find a number of expressions which position kinship as a matter not of honour but of sentiment. On one occasion she writes 'seeing you be so far from me in a strange country, my motherly heart fears many perils that might happen to you'.⁸⁸ On another she thanks him for a letter concluding with pleasure 'you do not forget your mother, who esteems you above her own life.'⁸⁹

For the mid-century period few letters survive to represent the gentry. In those which have been preserved, however, strong elements of continuity from the fifteenth century can be seen. As

⁸⁴Crawford, ed., *Letters of the Queens of England*, p. 219. [BL, MS Cotton Vespasian F. III, f. 29; original in Latin].

⁸⁵Dickens, ed., *Clifford Letters*, No. 30, pp. 104-05; Hoyle, ed., 'Clifford Letters', Nos. 43-46, pp. 90-95.

⁸⁶BL, MS Cotton Vespasian F. XIII, f. 72.

⁸⁷Wood, ed., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies:III*, Letters CXLII, CXLVI, pp. 301-09.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, Letter CXLV, pp. 306-07 at p. 306.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, Letter CXLVI, pp. 307-09 at p. 308.

before, gentry children seem to address their parents in terms similar to those used by acquaintances, and even strangers of comparable status writing at the same date. In 1514 Anne Boleyn wrote a letter to her father in French, saluting him correctly 'Monsieur' and signing 'vostre treshumble et tresobeissante fille'.⁹⁰ In the 1530s Robert Plumpton sent two epistles to his 'Right worshipful mother' while his brother addresses to his father as 'Right worshipfull Sir'.⁹¹ Modes of address directed to children seem equally unchanged from the foregoing period. In an angry letter of 1532 Elizabeth George saluted her adult son simply 'John George'.⁹² Elizabeth Newhouse affected the style 'Well-beloved son Roger Wright', William Plumpton the plainer 'Son Robart Plumpton'.⁹³ The same form is observed in the single example from this period of a father of merchant status writing to a child: John Tupholme's letter to his son begins 'William Tupholme, I commend me unto you, and I send you my blessing'.⁹⁴ As in the preceding century, the unqualified full name appears to have been the correct modes of address for servants; not just the form of address, but its implications would therefore appear to be unchanged from the previous century.⁹⁵

As we saw when discussing fifteenth-century correspondence, letters written by members of the gentry are usually less elevated in style than those composed by their noble contemporaries. When viewed in their contemporary context, however, it is clear that this looseness of style should not be read as a sign of familiarity. Rhetorical similarities between the letters of the two

⁹⁰Hester W. Chapman, *Anne Boleyn* (London, 1974), p. 37.

⁹¹J. Kirby, ed., *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, Camden 5th Series 8 (1996), Nos. 229-30, 218, pp. 205-07, 198. For use of the analogous formulae 'Right worshipfull Mistres' and 'Right worshipful Sir' by non-relatives see *Ibid.*, Nos. 234-35, 247, 249, etc.

⁹²Wood, ed., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies:II*, Letter XLIII, p. 95.

⁹³*Ibid.*:II, Letter II, p. 3; Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 232, pp. 210-11 at p. 210.

⁹⁴Barbara Winchester, *Tudor Family Portrait* (London, 1955), p. 226.

⁹⁵This is how the De la Pole brothers addressed their steward in 1504, for example, and also the form of salutation used by John Trevelyan to a local wool draper in the final quarter of the century J. Gairdner, ed., *Letters and Papers of Richard III and Henry VII*, 2 vols., Rolls Series 24 (1861-63):I, No. XXX, p. 253; W. C. Calverley Trevelyan and C.E. Trevelyan, eds., *Trevelyan Papers: Part Three (1477-1776)*, Camden 1st series 105 (1872), pp. 24-25.

social groups are more clearly evident. Like their predecessors, for example, the offspring of the gentry couch requests in careful terms, strongly marked by the terms of social deference.

In the fifteenth century William Stonor consistently presents requests to his father in the humblest possible terms. The closing passage of a letter of 1473 reads, for example:

No more to your good fadyrhod at thys tyme: but I *mekely beseche* your good fadyrhod that thys my bylle may recomaund me unto my good modyr yn my most umbyl vyse, *mekely besechyng* my good modyr of hir dayly blessing &c., *mekely besechyng* your fadyrhod in lyke wyse ...⁹⁶

Half a century later the same concepts seem to govern the parent-child bond. Around 1519

William Plumpton writes to his father:

Right worshipfull Sir, after dew recomendations had, I homly [sic] recommend me vnto you & to my lady & mother in law, *beseching* your for your daly blessing ... Sir, I *besech* you of your best counsell ... Wherefore, Sir, I *besech* you to make some search therfore ...⁹⁷

Because they are directed to inferiors, the letters of parents do not contain reference to the status of their children. However, as in the preceding century, their letters suggest that parent-child relations were structured according to hierarchical rules: their missives are usually commanding in tone, and notably lacking in expressions of sentiment. To his own son, William Plumpton writes, for example:

I hertely recommend me to you, and sending you and your brother God blesing and mine. The cause of my writing you now, that I wold you should helpe this bearer, yong Letham, in such buisenes as he hath in the court of augmentation ...⁹⁸

In many letters the emphasis, as here, is strictly pragmatic. In other cases the stress is placed not on the welfare of the child but on the importance of correct social behaviour. In draft messages to her daughters, Lady Lisle's main priority was to remind them to be good servants in the houses in which they had been placed. To Mary she writes, for example 'Sending God's blessing

⁹⁶SL, No. 127, pp. 219-20 at p. 220. See also Nos. 118, 122, 128, 136. In these letters the verb besech is applied to secular requests; it is not specific to the request for blessings.

⁹⁷Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 218, p. 198. Similar traits can be seen in the letters of the Basset children (who were of gentle status) to their mother Honor Lisle. See Muriel St. Clare Byrne, ed., *The Lisle Letters: An Abridgement* (Chicago, 1983), Nos. 73, 87, 89, 298, 300 *inter alia*.

⁹⁸Kirby, ed., *Plumpton Letters*, No. 232, p. 210.

and mine, willing you to serve God and please my lord and lady: and so doing I think the cost of you well employed.’⁹⁹ Though rather less socially elevated than Honor Lisle, the merchant John Tulpholme expresses similar values to his son in 1548:

I pray God give you grace for to be his servant, and that you may apply yourself in all your affairs for to please your master and mistress, the which would be great comfort unto me.¹⁰⁰

In the middle of the sixteenth century the general texture of parent-child relations seems little changed from that of the preceding period; as before, status takes precedence over kinship. One particular, and justly famous example, contradicts this picture. The letters exchanged by Sir Thomas More and his children, in the decade and a half preceding his execution, show several traits quite unlike anything seen in the letters explored hitherto. The first feature of this kind is the use of the familiar form of the second-person pronoun. Condemnation of the use of the pronoun ‘vos’ to an individual was a shibboleth of humanist Latinity (and epistolary theory). It is therefore unsurprising to find that it is the familiar form ‘tu’ which is used by More in his Latin letters to his children.¹⁰¹ More’s innovation consists rather in the occasional use of the equivalent English form ‘thou’ in his vernacular letters. In 1534, for example, he wrote to Margaret Roper from the Tower:

The father of heauen mote strenght thy frailtie, my good daughter and the frayltie of thy fraile father too.¹⁰²

In the postscript of another letter of the same year he writes:

as for longe lyfe (as I haue often tolde *the Megge*) I neither loke for, nor long for, but am well content to goe, if God call me hence to morowe .¹⁰³

In both of these letters the subject of discussion is religious, and it could therefore be argued

⁹⁹St. Clare Byrne, ed., *Lisle Letters*, No. 95, p. 119. She urges Anne ‘that ye keep you a good maiden’ in *ibid.*, No. 96, p. 119.

¹⁰⁰Winchester, ed., *Tudor Family Portrait*, p. 226.

¹⁰¹The ‘tu’ form was used by Edward VI in his Latin letters to his royal progenitors. J. G. Nichols, ed., *Literary Remains of King Edward the Sixth*, 2 vols. (London, 1857):I, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰²E. Rogers, ed., *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More* (Princeton, 1947), p. 545.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, pp. 507-08.

that the use of the 'thou' is suggested by the language of prayer, in which both the Deity and fellow worshippers are conventionally addressed by this pronoun. However, an alternative explanation, particularly convincing in accounting for the intermittent use of the form, would be that it indicates feelings of particular intimacy, which override the considerations of respect inherent in the you-form. This latter theory seems supported by other features of the language of these letters. As we see in the second extract quoted above, More addresses his daughter by a diminutive form of her name 'Megge', a habit which is also extended to his other children. The contents of the letters are also less austere, and more emotional in their rhetoric, than those which we considered earlier:

If I wolde with my writing, (mine owne good daughter) declare how much pleasure and comfort your daughterlye louing letters wer vnto me, a pecke of coles wolde not suffice to make me the pennes.¹⁰⁴

Further evidence that a more intimate, or at least less status-orientated concept of parent-child relations is at work here, is found in Margaret's letters to her father. Though to modern eyes these letters are less obviously intimate than those of More, contemporaries would undoubtedly have been surprised by the tone of Margaret's writing. Though she signs herself in fifteenth-century style 'Your most obedient daughter and bedeswoman', Margaret consistently represents the relationship as a loving one, in which social status plays no part. Thus where Robert and William Plumpton address their parents by title and by status epithets, Margaret addresses her father simply 'Myne owne good father', 'Myne own most entirely beloued father'. Coupled with this omission of social epithets are statements of emotional attachment which echo those found in her father's letters:

Father, I am sory I haue no lenger laysure at this time to talke with you, the chief comferte of my lyfe, I trust again to haue occasion to write again shortly.¹⁰⁵

In his own time, Sir Thomas More's letters to his children appear exceptional. By the later sixteenth century, however, aspects of this correspondence find some echoes in the letters of

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 540.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 539.

other parents. Around 1580 Elizabeth Bourne wrote to her son Edward, protesting a devotion comparable to that which More expressed to Margaret:

My good sonne. I dyd rather thynke I had trubled you to often wyth my lettres then that you loked for more from me, consydering thay brynge nothyng to you but the trewe pycture of my good wyll. But yf the travel of my pen wyth the reste of my body could brynge you the favour of the hyer poweres or the welth of an emproure then you showld no I would make no stoppe ...¹⁰⁶

In this letter the sentiment, though particularised, is expressed in rather formal, rhetorical language. In other letters, however, intimacy is seen in stylistic features as well as in content. We have already alluded to the holograph letters which Sir Edward and Lady Fytton sent to their eldest daughter Anne. Just as significant as the graphic style of these epistles is their language. Though Anne was a married woman when these letters to her were written, she is addressed not by title, or even by full Christian name, but by the diminutive 'Nan'. In two of her father's letters, written shortly after the delivery of Anne's daughter, further echoes of More's correspondence are seen. Not only does Sir Edward convey a strongly emotional message, but he also slips between the familiar and respectful forms of the second-person pronoun.

God in heaven bless thee and my daughter, and contynew thy health and lyfe as my dearest friend and thereby comfort, next thy poore mother.¹⁰⁷

Both here, and in the letters from Anne's mother, the emphasis is placed firmly on sentiment. Anne's parents focus on the idea of personal health and happiness, rather than on duty or appropriate moral or social behaviour. Lady Fytton writes, for example:

My good Nan, I pray God bless you and my letle daughter. I longe to hear excedinglie how you boeth do.¹⁰⁸

Similar values seem to be at work in a body of parent-child letters which straddles the divide between gentry and nobility. In their youth, Sir John Holles consistently addressed his children by diminutive forms of their Christian names; 'Jack' for John and 'Den', for Denzil, for

¹⁰⁶BL, MS Additional 23212, f. 184.

¹⁰⁷Lady Newdigate-Newdegate, *Gossip from a Muniment Room*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 17.

example.¹⁰⁹ We can see from other letters in the same collection that Holles's usual manner of addressing his servants was by surname, or by both surname and Christian name.¹¹⁰ The diminutive form of the name would therefore seem to denote particular affection rather than social condescension. More significant still are the conventions of the letters which Holles directed to his children in later years, when he had ascended to the earldom of Clare, and they too had attained the status of peers. Though Holles addressed his son-in-law by his title, as 'Lord Wentworth', to his daughter, the Viscountess, he continued to write in simple terms, which privileged the parent-child bond over the claims of status:

Arbella, the Lord of heaven bless yow and yours, and grant yow health and his grace. Your mother and I came yesterday to Nottingham, and beeing desirous to know, how my sunn, yow and your little ones do, have sent this messenger.¹¹¹

Another other factor which distinguishes these letters from those of the gentry or the nobility of mid-century is the frequency and sentimentality of the allusions to family, and in particular to young children. The following passage is taken from a letter to his eldest son, 'Jack', Lord Haughton:

God bless you, my daughter, and pretty Betty, and yet not prettier then my Nann of Haughton, your mother says, the prettiest sweet chyld of this kingdom...¹¹²

Though less compendious, examples of similar language-use can also be seen in more indisputably noble contexts. In the 1590s Lettice Dudley, Countess of Leicester, wrote a series of holograph letters to her son Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex. Rather than alluding to her son by his title of dignity, Lettice adopts a more intimate tone:

Swet Ro / your self hath geuen me such a tast of sume strang matter to be loked for / as I cannot be quiet tyll I know the trew caus of your abcence and dyscontentment...¹¹³

¹⁰⁹Seddon, ed., *Letters of John Holles*:I, Nos. 87, 153, 166, 167, 170, 202, etc.

¹¹⁰Ibid.:I, Nos. 71, 72, 109.

¹¹¹Seddon, ed., *Letters of John Holles*:III, No. 562, p. 431. Wentworth is addressed at Ibid.:III, No. 583, p. 444, others lords in Nos. 558 and 560 *inter alia* .

¹¹²Seddon, ed., *Letters of John Holles*:III, No. 525, p. 405.

¹¹³Transcription given in James Daybell, 'Women's Letters and Letter Writing in England, 1540-1603:An Introduction to the Issues of Authorship and Construction', *Shakespeare Studies* 27 (1999): 161-85, p. 179.

When an adult, married woman, Maria Thynne's mother addressed her not as 'Mrs Thynne' but simply 'Mall'.¹¹⁴ More striking still, in their informality, are the letters which Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury sent to her daughter Mary in the 1580s. Not only does this writer use affectionate epithets, such as 'swete harte', 'dear harte', 'My good sweete daughter', but her rhetoric is also unmistakably sentimental in emphasis.¹¹⁵ In 1580 she writes, for example, 'I pray you let me hear this nighte how yow and your good Lorde do, else shall I not slepe quiatly'.¹¹⁶ The one surviving letter written by Elizabeth I in a quasi-parental capacity seems to fit into this pattern of growing sentimentality in modes of expression. In 1575 she saluted her godson, John Harrington as 'Boy Jack', and continued her address in the informal second-person pronoun:

I have made a clerk write fair my poor words for thine use... Ponder them in thy hours of leisure, and play with them until they enter thine understanding; so shalt thou hereafter, perchance, find some good fruits hereof when thy godmother is out of remembrance...¹¹⁷

As with the drift towards a more overtly sentimental style of discourse in marital correspondence, these late sixteenth-century developments appear to be consolidated in the seventeenth century. By this period children at all social levels are addressed by diminutives of their Christian name, as 'Sweet Will', 'My deare Tom', or 'Dear Ned'.¹¹⁸ Parents now often express affection explicitly; in such contexts the informal pronoun is often used even when adult children are addressed. In 1622, for example, Elizabeth Smith began a letter to her son at Oxford with a plea for news 'knowing *you* will not forget a mother that longes to hire how you endured to your journeyes ende'. She ends, however, on a still more emphatically sentimental

¹¹⁴Wall, ed., *Two Elizabethan Women*, No. 64, p. 50 (1610).

¹¹⁵Lambeth Palace Library, MS Talbot 3205, ff. 59 and 64.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, f. 64.

¹¹⁷Sanders, ed., *Intimate Letters of England's Queens*, p. 78.

¹¹⁸Hughey, ed., *Correspondence of Lady Katherine Paston*, Nos. 31, 39, 41, 43 inter alia; John Bruce, ed., *Letters and Papers of the Verney Family Down to the End of the Year 1639*, Camden Society o.s. 56 (1853), pp. 216, 266; T. T. Lewis, ed., *Letters of the Lady Brilliana Harley*, Camden Society o.s. 58 (1854), Nos. X, LXVIII, CLXV inter alia.

note 'Thus Sweet harte, prayeing to God to bless you with his best blessing, to his holy protection I comyte *thee*'.¹¹⁹ The same shift, also apparently triggered by emotion, is seen in a letter from Oliver Cromwell to his daughter-in-law. The beginning of the letter reads:

My dear daughter, Your letter was very welcome to me. I like to see anything from your hand, because indeed I stick not to say I do entirely love you. And therefor I hope a word of advice will not be unwelcome to *thee*.¹²⁰

Though it is not uniform, the pattern - towards familiarity in style and sentimentality in modes of expression - is comparatively strong in the letters of parents. The letters of children present a different, and rather more complicated picture. The social stratum in which the clearest trend is to be seen is the nobility. Unlike the missives written by their parents, the letters of noble children remain very close to those of their fifteenth-century predecessors. We have seen that the Dowager Countess of Shrewsbury addressed her children informally, appealing to them in sentimental terms. Her children, by contrast, express themselves in a vocabulary of social respect rather than one of emotion. When already a married woman, Elizabeth writes, for example:

Madame, though I now have no other ocaion to draw me to trobell your La: with my ill hande, butt only to perform my duty, in humblye presentinge my service by every messenger, the continewance of which I presume to bessech yor La; to give me leave to doo...¹²¹

In these letters the addressee is saluted 'correctly', according to the rules of social etiquette. Though it differs from the curial prose written by nobles mid-century, the style too is formal and elaborate; it presents a clear contrast with the almost careless style of the Dowager's letters. Almost identical features can be observed in the correspondence of other noble children writing in the same period. In 1591, for example, the Earl of Rutland wrote to his mother, also a

¹¹⁹Betty, ed., *Calendar of Smyth Correspondence*, p. 57. For other correspondents who follow a similar pattern of 'lapsing' into the informal second person pronoun, see Hughey, ed., *Correspondence of Lady Katherine Paston*, pp. Nos. 39, 49, 63, 70 inter alia; Bruce, ed., *Letters and Papers of the Verney Family*, pp. 119, 216.

¹²⁰Lomas, ed., *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell:II*, p. 452

¹²¹Lambeth Palace Library, MS Talbot 3205, f. 104. See also the letters of Katherine Pembroke, Ann Talbot, Gilbert Talbot and Grace Cavendish to their mother, printed in Hunter, *Hallamshire*, pp. 113-119.

dowager, with careful acknowledgment of her social station:

I geve your Ladyship humble thankes for your honourable direction in your letters for my good. I do aseure your Ladyship that the cariage of myself both towardes God and my bookes, my comeliness in diet and gesture, shall be such as your Ladyship shall hear and like well of.¹²²

Lucy St John wrote to her father, Lord Burghley, with equal care. Indeed, so formal is this letter, both in tone and in style, that it is difficult to distinguish from those of many contemporary petitioners. She opens, for example:

Righte honorable and my very good Lord my duty most humbly remembrede ...with my most humble and dutyfull thankes for your Lo: manyfolde cennes [kindness] every way showede daly towardes me.¹²³

The letters written by children of gentry status are more varied in character. Some follow the same pattern as the correspondence of their noble contemporaries. In the letters of Nathaniel Bacon, for example, the parent-child relationship is radically de-emphasised. Nathaniel always addresses Sir Nicholas as 'your Lordship', never as 'father', and writes in a formal, deferential style:

With humble remembraunce of my dutie, it maie please your Lordship to understande * that I wrot a letter to yow dated the xx of this moneth* that my brother Woodhouse will performe that which he wrot unto your Lordship...¹²⁴

This relationship was perhaps unusual; as Lord Privy seal, Sir Nicholas Bacon enjoyed a more elevated position in relation to his son than was usual. However, the same tendency, to privilege the claims of status above those of kinship, is also found in the letters of children whose parents were less socially eminent. Sir John Holles addressed his progenitor, a knight, not as 'my good father' but as 'Sir'.¹²⁵ At first sight Philip Gawdy's letters seem to reflect different values. As in Margaret Roper's letters, the adjectives used to describe his parents are those which describe the writer's emotional attitude. His mother is addressed as 'most loving and dear Mother' and

¹²²HMC, *Manuscripts of the Duke of Rutland*:I, p. 297.

¹²³BL, MS Lansdowne 104, f. 175.

¹²⁴NBL:I, p. 33.

¹²⁵Seddon, ed., *Letters of John Holles*:I, No.1, p. 1.

thanked for her 'loving carefulnes'; his father is described as 'Most loving and gentle Father'.¹²⁶

In letters written in the late 1580s, however, Gawdy suddenly switches to a more formal style.

In 1587 he writes, for example:

Sir, The tyme shall not be long (by the grace of God) that I do meane to wayte of [sic] yow my self. And yet I cold not chose in the meane tyme but somewhat to shewe the desire I have of a true perfourmance of my vnfayned duty.¹²⁷

By analogy with similar changes in letters to his brother, it seems that this shift may be prompted by some kind of increase in the father's status, in comparison to that of the son.¹²⁸ In the case of another writer we can be certain that alteration in style is conditioned by a change of this kind. Before her father-in-law's attainment of knighthood in 1604, Maria Thynne addresses her mother-in-law as 'good mother' and 'dearly loved mother'. After this date, however, she begins with due deference 'Good Lady'.¹²⁹

These examples suggest that formulae which seem to betoken affection, such as 'good father' or 'sweet mother', might function simply as latterday equivalents of 'welbeloved'. That is, rather than expressing feelings, or specific attitudes towards the relationship on the part of the writer, they represent the correct way of addressing a relation whose status was not sufficiently great to merit the styles 'sir' or 'madame'. This conclusion seems further supported by the observation that writers whose parents were not of knightly status seem frequently to begin simply 'Dear father' or 'Dear mother'.¹³⁰ There are some important exceptions to this rule, however. Although Elizabeth Willoughby's father was a knight, she wrote to him in simple

¹²⁶Isaac Herbert Jeayes, ed., *Letters of Philip Gawdy of West Harling, Norfolk* (London, 1906), pp. 8 and 1.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹²⁸Philip's father, Bassingbourne Gawdy, is not listed as a knight in the Dictionary of National Biography. However, a similar shift from salutations such as 'Sweet Brother' to 'Sir' coincides very clearly with the elevation of Philip's brother to the knighthood in 1597. See Jeayes, ed., *Letters of Philip Gawdy*, p. viii and compare letters at pp. 36-8, 39-43 to those at pp. 93-97, etc.

¹²⁹Wall, ed., *Two Elizabethan Women*, p. xxiv. 'In 1604 John Thynne, recently knighted, died...' See No. 46, p. 31 'To you, my dearly loved mother are these lines sent...' (1603) and No. 49, p. 33 'Good Lady: out of my care to your health let me entreat you to temper your choler...' (1605).

¹³⁰This is seen in the letters Anne Townshend, and of the Carnsewe and later Gawdy families. *NBL:III*, p. 279; PRO, SP46/71/77; BL, MS Additional 36989, ff. 23-107.

kinship terms. Further, though the writer was on poor terms with her addressee, it is to emotion rather than duty to which she appeals for redress:

My very good father: Many and those very grevous, have bene the discomforts of my lyfe, synce the tyme of my seperation from Sr Francis, my husband. But emongst them all, there is none that hath troubled me more, or toucht me nearer, than the alienation of yor good opynion & fatherly affection towards me.¹³¹

More suggestive still, of the way in which kinship could now be privileged over status in the negotiation of epistolary relationships, are a group letters written by Anne Bacon. As an illegitimate child, Anne was in the unusual position of having two step-parents, in addition to her birth parents; this gives us an opportunity of evaluating the different weight given to the factors of status and kinship. In 1572 Anne wrote two letters within a few days of each other. The first, to her stepmother Lady Anne Gresham, is impeccably deferential. The letter opens with the salutation 'Madame', and Anne adheres throughout to the indirect form of address, 'your Ladyship'. The sentiments expressed are irreproachably respectful, and the style both formal and elaborate:

I knowe I cannot so often writ as dutie bindeth me to writ, yet I hope your Ladyship's goodwill resteth sutch towarde me as yow will not upon so small an occasion conceive ill of me. I have not mutch wherof to writ, except it be to acknowledg how greatly I am bound to your Ladyship for the great care that yow alwaies had of my well doinge...¹³²

The letter which she sent to her natural father, communicating similar news, contrasts with that to her stepmother in every one of these respects. Though Nathaniel recognised Sir Thomas's status in a letter of the same year, saluting him politely 'Sir', Anne opens in rather simpler style 'My verie good father', and in the body of the letter omits the circumlocution 'your Lordship' which had been used to her stepmother. The apology which is extended for lack of communication is also considerably less elaborate than that earlier offered to Lady Gresham:

I will not go about to excuse my self for that I have no oftener written; the let hath bene because I haue litle wherof to writ.¹³³

¹³¹Friedman, 'Portrait of a Marriage', p. 549.

¹³²*NBL*:I, p. 25.

¹³³*Ibid.*, p. 26.

The sense of familiarity, suggested by the lack of ceremony in these lines, is further developed by an allusion to Anne's pastimes, of which there is no mention in the letter to Lady Gresham:

My husbände causeth me to use my singinge, & besides to learne some songes upon the virginolles. I writ this the rather because you willed me not to forget my songes.¹³⁴

The development of correspondence between parents and children falls into a less coherent pattern than that of married couples. Not all parents write identically, or even always in the same mode to different offspring. Siblings can address parents differently, and sometimes also change their manner of writing over the course of their lives. Some broad trends can nevertheless be observed. First, from the last quarter of the sixteenth century a new, more sentimental language becomes available to parents. The two features most clearly associated with this are the use of the second-person pronoun 'thou', in contexts which suggest affect rather than condescension, and use of the diminutive form of children's names 'Nan', 'Megge', 'Jack'. In the letters of children less dramatic changes are perceptible; ideas of duty and deference continue to be of great importance into the seventeenth century and beyond. In some letters, however, the emphasis is shifted from the obligation owed to the parent as individuals of *social* eminence, to the reciprocal duties particular to the *blood* relationship. The letters of both parents and children are now more likely to refer to emotional states; both are more firmly differentiated from the correspondence of lords and retainers than was true in the preceding period. As with marriage, so too with the parent-child relationship, the 'surge in sentiment' understood as a linguistic phenomenon, clearly comes a century earlier than either Stone or Shorter have suggested.

Analysis

The majority of writers who have described long-term changes in family relations have identified the later seventeenth century as the moment of transition to more informal, affective

¹³⁴Ibid., p. 26.

modes of intercourse.¹³⁵ Only one writer, Ralph Houlbrooke, has anticipated the argument of the present chapter, that the origin of a more intimate epistolary style among the propertied classes can be traced back to the second half of the preceding century. Houlbrooke's thesis is based on the juxtaposition of a wide variety of different sources; his treatment of letters is therefore necessarily cursory. This author has, nevertheless, generated two distinct theories to account for change in letter-writing styles, both of which merit some scrutiny. These will serve as a starting point for our analysis of the changes which we have demonstrated in the previous two chapters.

The first theory which Houlbrooke propounds is offered primarily in connection with the relationship which shows the clearest pattern of change, marriage. In the context of the discussion of the Lisle evidence, Houlbrooke suggests that these changes are prompted not by 'real' changes in the concept of relationships. Rather:

Later on the tone of letters became much freer and more intimate. This was due not so much to a changing view of a wife's place as to greater epistolary privacy. As female literacy grew among the propertied classes and the custom of dictation to a clerk declined, so the composition of letters became a more personal and private matter.¹³⁶

As we saw in chapter one, the assertion that female literacy increased in this period is well-founded. So too is the argument that a growing number of spouses exchanged autograph letters by the later sixteenth century. However, a careful review of the relationship between autography and 'intimacy' in style suggests a more complex casual link. The affectionate, unapologetic letters which Sabine Johnson wrote to her husband in the middle of the sixteenth century are all holograph. Indeed, the improvement in her writing skills observable over the course of the correspondence may suggest that John Johnson encouraged his wife's efforts, as a way of achieving epistolary privacy.¹³⁷ More widely, however, no direct correlation can be seen between the graphic mode of marital correspondence and its style. As we have noted earlier,

¹³⁵See above chapter four nn. 2-3.

¹³⁶Ralph Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1450-1700* (Harlow, 1984), p. 170.

¹³⁷'John's tuition and a few years of constant practice improved her writing out of all measure...'Winchester, ed., *Tudor Family Portrait*, p. 68.

Honor Lisle does not seem to have been capable of writing; the affectionate tone of her letters is not based on epistolary privacy. In the same fashion, Eleanor, Countess of Cumberland's letter to her husband, which opens affectionately 'Dear Heart', bears only the signature of the author.¹³⁸ Conversely, letters which wives wrote in their own hands are not automatically intimate in tone. The missive which Lora Ormond 'crebyllyd' to her husband in her 'powyre' hand alludes to the addressee formally as 'your lordship'.¹³⁹ Catherine Parr's letters to both Thomas Seymour and Henry VIII preserve all the formality of dictated letters of the previous century.¹⁴⁰ Most of the letters written by wives in the final quarter of the century are autograph, yet a substantial number adhere to modes of address such as 'Sir'.¹⁴¹ The shift to autography in family letters coincides with the development of a more affectionate mode of expression. It does not, however, appear directly to have produced it.

Despite its initial appeal, Houlbrooke's first hypothesis must therefore be discarded. His second explanation for changes in sixteenth-century letters is more sophisticated, and demands more extended consideration. In relation to letters exchanged by parents and children he argues:

Medieval letters had emphasised the distance between superiors and subordinates within the family. The humanists revived the simpler epistolary forms of antiquity, and encouraged in the letter-writer the cultivation of an easy, intimate style, and the expression of individual feelings of affection.¹⁴²

Similar arguments can also be found in the secondary literature on epistolary theory. In 1989 Charles Fantazzi describes the difference between medieval and Renaissance approaches to letter-writing. For the theoretician of the later period:

The chief concern is the identity of his correspondent. No longer is the form of address and general tone of the letter determined by social standing, but by the

¹³⁸Dickens, ed., *Clifford Letters*, No. 44, p. 126.

¹³⁹PRO, SC1/51/167.

¹⁴⁰Gairdner et al, eds, *Letters and Papers: XIX*, Part 1, No. 1029.

¹⁴¹Key, ed., 'Letters and will of Lady Dorothy Bacon', pp. 85-87; BL, Microfilm 904/1, vol 1, f. 231; Friedman, 'Portrait of a Marriage', pp. 550, 554.

¹⁴²Houlbrooke, *English Family*, p. 32.

personal characteristics of the recipient.¹⁴³

According to Fantazzi, the key difference between medieval and Renaissance ideas can be traced to their different orientation to the texts of Antiquity. Through his rediscovery of Cicero's *Ad familiares*, Petrarch heralded a revolution in epistolary theory:

with the publication of the *Epistola de rebus familiaribus* Petrarch put an end to the reign of the dictatores and their rigid prescriptions, which had inhibited the spontaneity of the personal letter for many centuries ...¹⁴⁴

In order to test this hypothesis two forms of evidence must be considered. First, we must examine the epistolary theory of the medieval and early modern periods, to assess whether Houlbrooke and Fantazzi's description of transition is accurate. Second, given the comparative absence of vernacular manuals in our period, actual letters will be examined, to assess whether the shift to affective language does in fact coincide with the adoption of humanist tropes.

As we saw in chapter one, the most common way of dividing letters in medieval theory was according to the status of the writer and recipient; letters could be written to superiors, equals (*familiares/equipollentes*) or inferiors. This structure facilitated the organisation of kinship according to status, and in some cases this course was explicitly advocated. The anonymous author of the twelfth-century treatise *Rationes dictandi* remarks, for example:

a salutation of a son to his parents should by all means be one which is described above as appropriate to be sent to superiors by subordinates, as for example, "filial veneration with love," "servitude of filial veneration," and the like.¹⁴⁵

In a treatise rather closer to our own period, written by the fourteenth-century Oxford dictator Thomas Sampson, the reader receives similar advice. Concerning sisters, Sampson suggests, for example:

Et a vostre soer vous escripverez en la maniere comme a une autre femme, tout dis eiant regart a leur estat.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³'Introduction', in Juan Luis Vives, *De conscribendis epistolis*, ed. and trans. Charles Fantazzi (Leiden and New York, 1989), p. 6

¹⁴⁴Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁴⁵J. Murphy, ed., *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1971) p. 7.

¹⁴⁶BL, MS Harley 3988, f. 28v.

As Houlbrooke and Fantazzi suggest, humanist epistolary manuals adduce different ideas. The first area in which this is seen is salutations. In his influential *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* Erasmus writes, for example:

It is ... foolish that some courtiers cannot stand their own children calling their father by the name 'father', or their mother by that of 'mother'; they dislike sharing anything with the common people to such an extent that they prefer to be called 'master' and 'mistress', although nothing is more respectful or more charged with emotion than these words.¹⁴⁷

Rather than the grandiloquent salutations which he associates with the *dictatores*, Erasmus urges the reader to use simple epithets such as 'dearest' or 'excellent' when writing to family members. The second relates to the categorisation of letters. Rather than dividing letters according to the relative status of writer and recipient, as the *dictatores* had done, Erasmus described a variety of different letter types. One of these, following Cicero's model, was letters 'ad familiares', or familiar letters.

It is true that some *dictatores* assimilate kinship into status, while some humanists suggest a new category of 'familiar' letters, and advocate the use of affectionate epithets when writing to family members. The contention that the sixteenth century saw a complete shift from one set of letter-writing precepts to another is, however, a considerable oversimplification. First, not all medieval theorists organised kinship according to status categories. In contrast to Sampson, for example, Bernard of Bologna identified kinship rather than rank as the main determinant of salutations:

A father, grandfather, or greatgrandfather is always greater than a son or grandson, even if greater power or dignity is on the other side, and a bishop should therefore write to a father, grandfather, or greatgrandfather as to a greater person.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷Desiderius Erasmus, 'De conscribendis epistolis', ed. and trans. Charles Fantazzi in J.K.Sowards, ed., *Collected Works of Erasmus Vol 25: Literary and Educational Writings 3* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 1985), pp. 1-254, p. 51.

¹⁴⁸Giles Constable, 'The Structure of Medieval Society According to the Dictatores of the Twelfth Century' in K. Pennington and R. Somerville, eds., *Law Church and Society: Essays in Honor of Stephen Kutner* (Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 253-67 at pp. 256-57.

Other writers seem to understand family relationships and status as quasi-independent categories. Hugh of Bologna enters 'Ad patrem' and 'Ad fratrem' as distinct items in his list of model salutations, the former beneath 'Ad magistrum' and above 'Ad amicum', the latter between 'Ad abbatem' and 'Ad militem'.¹⁴⁹ A similar principle is to be seen at work in the early fourteenth-century treatise *Practica siue usus dictaminis*, written by Lawrence of Aquilegia. Murphy writes that this *dictator* treats parents in the same manner as cardinals, bishops and archbishops, and classes brothers with 'amicos', 'mercatores' and 'notarios'.¹⁵⁰ However, examination of the version of the treatise which belonged to Reading Abbey in the later Middle Ages shows that these categories were not considered identical. The title of the second table does indeed list parents alongside members of the church hierarchy, but beneath this the following subheading is found:

Item alie salutaciones ad patres, patruos, amicos, fratres, sorores, avunculos, amicos & quoscumque consimiles.¹⁵¹

Under this title two tables are found, one for male relatives and one for female. Though the status terms '*reverende*' and '*honoratissime*' are listed here, so too are of the terms suggested by humanist epistolographers: '*karissime*', '*dulcissime*', '*amantissime*'. The same distinct treatment is extended to brothers, relations ('*consanguineos/cognatos*') and friends in table five of the same work.¹⁵² If late medieval writers chose to present kinship within the framework of status, this would appear to be a decision based on external factors, such as social mores.

Not all medieval *dictatores* prescribed unemotional, status-orientated language in letters between family members. Conversely, not all humanists emphasize the need for informality in letters between close kin. Though Erasmus wrote at some length concerning the correct use of epithets in letters between close relatives, the majority of his contemporaries show minimal interest in this topic. Vives, for example, devotes considerable energy to debunking the old

¹⁴⁹James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1972), p. 217.

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 261.

¹⁵¹BL, Additional MS 62998, f. 9r.

¹⁵²*Ibid.*, f. 14r.

system of epithets; like the ancients, modern writers should eschew titles other than those alluding to public office:

Other titles, originating from a debased custom, produce laughter or annoyance rather than confer distinction.¹⁵³

However, his discussion of the forms which salutations should take is restricted to the discussion of male friendship; no models are forthcoming for the conduct of family correspondence.¹⁵⁴ If we turn to vernacular manuals we discover that the modes of salutation offered generally place less emphasis on status than do those used in fifteenth-century letters. Yet we do not find prescribed in these works the more striking innovations seen in letters of the period. In these manuals husbands begin 'good wife' not 'Sweet heart', while children are greeted 'Son' or 'Daughter' rather than 'Good Nan' or 'Sweet Robin'.¹⁵⁵

It is equally unclear that the rejection of status as the dominant factor in the categorisation of letters was responsible for producing greater 'familiarity' in modes of writing. Some writers did indeed wish to see all writers express themselves in letters in 'the tone of conversation and familiar speech'.¹⁵⁶ Erasmus, who is regarded as the most influential humanist writer in Britain, did not follow this model however. The category of letters which Erasmus designates as 'familiar' is not intended to contrast with 'formal' or 'official' letters. Rather, like writers such as Brandolinus and Celtis, Erasmus divides letters according to rhetorical function not rather than addressee.¹⁵⁷ The term 'familiar' does not therefore describe letters sent to friends and

¹⁵³Vives, *De conscribendis epistolis*, ed. and trans. Fantazzi, p. 71.

¹⁵⁴ Other writers make equally scant mention of family relations, and where models are offered they differ surprisingly little to those proposed by Lawrence of Acquilegia. For example Christopher Hegendorff's cursory treatment of the topic reads as follows:

Cognatorum & affinium epitheta fere sunt haec, Pater optime, mater indulgentissima, frater charissime, patre observande, uxor suavis, nepos melitissime.

Christopher Hegendorff, 'Methodus conscribendi epistolis' in *De ratione scribendi libri tres* (Basle, 1549), p. 430

¹⁵⁵In Fulwood the husband writes to his 'Loving wife', and parents begin 'Verily, my sonne, 'Welbeloucd Daughter'. In Day the wife is greeted 'Good wife'. Fulwood, *Enimie of Idlennesse*, pp. 220, 218, 226; Day, *English Secretorie*, p. 79.

¹⁵⁶Vives, *De conscribendis epistolis*, ed. and trans. Fantazzi, p. 97.

¹⁵⁷Brandolinus suggests the categories 'demonstrative', 'deliberative' and 'judicial', while Celtis adopts a more

family, but rather missives whose function is too various to be accommodated in the major categories, 'deliberative', 'demonstrative' and 'judicial'. Erasmus describes it as follows:

It may include the following types; narrative, when we describe for those at a distance an event that has taken place near us; informative, when we announce a piece of news, whether of public, private, or domestic nature; congratulatory, when we are pleased at our friends' happiness; mournful, when we bewail either our own troubles or those of our acquaintances; mandatory, when we entrust to another a piece of business to be carried out on our behalf... ¹⁵⁸

Where used in vernacular treatises, the category of 'familiar' letters clearly does not correspond with the idea of 'letters to kin or intimates'. ¹⁵⁹

As we saw in chapter one, the few vernacular manuals which were produced in our period emerged quite late; the relationship between Latin precept and English practice is therefore difficult to chart in theoretical terms. The surest way to gauge whether changes in sixteenth-century letters are linked to humanist epistolary theory is therefore to examine the documents themselves. As we have already seen, one of the clearest precepts offered by Erasmus in his *Opus de conscribendis* is that children should address their parents simply by the kinship terms 'father' and 'mother'. Fulwood's *Enimie of Idlenesse* follows this suggestion; model letters to parents in this work open simply 'Derely beloued Father' and 'Dere and welbeloued mother'. ¹⁶⁰ If humanism were responsible for effecting a transition to more familiar modes of expression,

complex taxonomy which includes 'consolatory', 'commendatory' and 'hortatory' letters. *De ratione scribendi libri tres*, pp. 12-14 and 383.

¹⁵⁸Erasmus, 'De conscribendis epistolis', p. 71. This is a complex subject, which cannot be adequately discussed within the confines of the present thesis. However, it can be clearly stated that the sixteenth century did not see the restoration of a distinction between 'public' and 'private' letters described in the fourth century, but effaced by the *dictatores* of the Middle Ages. See inter alia Judith Rice Henderson, 'Defining the Genre of the Letter: Juan Luis Vives' *De Conscribendis Epistolis*', *Renaissance & Reformation* n.s. 77 (1983): 89-105; R. V. Young and Thomas Hester, ed., and trans., *Justus Lipsius Principles of Letter-Writing. A Bilingual Text of Justi Lipsi Epistolica Institutio* (Carbondale, 1996), Introduction.

¹⁵⁹Angel Day's section on familiar letters includes exchanges between masters and servants and petitions 'from a Gentlewoman of goode sort to a Noble man her kinsman'. These letters are subdivided by rehtorical functions as 'nunciatorie', 'gratulatorie', etc. The section of William Fulwood's manual entitled 'How to write domesticall and familiar Letters or Epistles' contains models for exchanges between male friends. Letters between family members are found in Book III. alongside exchanges between unacquainted gentles, nobles and merchants.

¹⁶⁰W. Fulwood, *Enimie of Idelnesse* (London, 1568), pp. 215, 228.

we would expect to see a sharp increase in the number of correspondents using these modes of address. As we have seen, however, though humanist epistolary traits such as indirect openings are commonly found in children's letters written in the later sixteenth century, simple 'informal' styles of address remain in the minority. The correspondence of noble children provides a second argument against Houlbrooke's thesis. By the final quarter of the century writers of this station have abandoned curial prose. The style with which it is replaced, though identifiable from its periods and its parens as 'humanist' or 'classicising' is, however, just as far from 'informality' as its medieval predecessor. A good illustration is provided by a letter sent by Princess Elizabeth to her step-mother Catherine Parr:

Not only knowing the effectuous will and fervent zeal, the which your highness hath towards all godly learning, as also my duty towards you, most gracious sovereign princess,; but knowing also that pusillanimity and idleness are most repugnant unto a reasonable creature, and that (as the philosopher sayeth) even as an instrument of iron or other metal waxeth soon rusty, unless it be continually occupied,; even so shall the wit of a man or a woman wax dull and unapt to do or understand anything perfectly, unless it be always occupied in some manner study.¹⁶¹

The effect which this letter creates is that of erudition and ceremoniousness rather than 'familiarity' or 'intimacy'.

In marriage we find the same absence of a match between humanist letter-writing styles and informality or sentimentality of content. Here the discrepancy is evident not simply in the failure of some late sixteenth-century couples to adopt a more informal writing style along with traits of humanist epistolography. Rather the greater difficulty is presented by the fact that the more 'sentimental' styles are evident in letters which are thoroughly 'medieval' in form. In chapter four we saw that Robert Plumpton and Thomas Stonor used affectionate epithets to wives in letters written entirely in conformity with the precepts of the *dictatores*. The same observation made be made of most of the couples who use affectionate styles in the middle of the following century. Though he consistently uses sentimental epithets to salute his wife, Arthur Lisle's letters are written according to the basic divisions prescribed by medieval epistolary theory. A typical letter reads, for example:

¹⁶¹Wood, ed., *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies*:III, p. 177.

[salutatio] My nown Swet Hart in my most hartyst wyse I commend me unto yow [narratio] sertyffing yow I resseuyd your letter the ix day of this monythe trustyng to see yow shortly' [petitio] I pray yow send word to me when I shall send over Lam with his shype for you ' [conclusio] And thus I byd yow most harttily fare well from Callis the x day of December your own most louyng husband for euer. ¹⁶²

Other writers who use sentimental modes of address in letters divided in accordance with dictaminal precepts include Honor Lisle, Eleanor, Countess of Cumberland, Thomas Rogers and Sabine Johnson. ¹⁶³

The obvious alternative to Houlbrooke's theory, that shifts in the vocabulary of family are rooted in the revival of 'the simpler epistolary forms of antiquity', is to conclude that these changes must reflect a wider transformation in social attitudes. Though the demonstration of this hypothesis lies beyond the scope of the present work, some preliminary fragments of evidence can certainly be adduced to support this thesis. The simplest way to approach this question is through terms of address. Recently Lass has observed that the use of 'you' in fifteenth-century letters is 'pragmatically homogenous', and attributes this not to social practice but to the 'formal' and 'utilitarian' nature of writing in this period. ¹⁶⁴ Similar conclusions might be drawn concerning the use to titles; though it is still conventional to open a business letter 'Dear Sir/Madam' such terms of address would rarely be used orally, in face-to-face situations. In the fifteenth century, however, the forms of address found in letters do appear, as far as can be determined, to reflect social practice. A perusal of literary texts of the later medieval period suggests that the formal second person pronoun 'you' was that habitually used between aristocrats, whether or not these were relatives. From an examination of Chaucer's works Burnley concludes:

The courtly gentleman usually calls his lady ye and this is the normal mode of address between husband and wife in polite society. ¹⁶⁵

¹⁶²PRO, SP3/1/22.

¹⁶³Dickens, ed., *Clifford Letters*, No. 44, p. 126; PRO, SP1/86/220.

¹⁶⁴R. Lass 'Phonology and Morphology' in R. Lass, ed., *Cambridge History of the English Language. Volume III: 1476-1776* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 56-186, at p. 150.

¹⁶⁵David Burnley, *A Guide to Chaucer's Language* (London, 1983), p. 18.

For the fifteenth century, the evidence is clearer still. Brewer has noted that in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, as in the letters, 'thou' is used sparingly, to indicate moments of tension, or attitudes of particular intimacy or contempt.¹⁶⁶ The respectful form of address is that consistently used between relatives, including Arthur and Guinevere.¹⁶⁷ In the York Play, composed in the same period as the Paston and Stonor Letters, similar practices can be observed. In this cycle Noah and his wife, who are portrayed as artisans, address each other by the singular form 'thou', and by the first name.¹⁶⁸ Pilate and his wife Procula, on the other hand, are characterized as aristocrats.¹⁶⁹ This couple follows very different conventions; though they consistently use 'thou' to address servants, when speaking to each other they use the polite 'you'. They also address each other by titles 'Madam', 'Gracious lord' which closely parallel those found in the correspondence of married couples up to the middle of the sixteenth century.¹⁷⁰

Literary parallels suggest a social provenance for the modes of address found in the correspondence of fifteenth-century husbands and wives. The same can be demonstrated also for the rather different conventions of the sixteenth century. We have already seen that terms of endearment such as 'Dearest' or 'Sweetheart' are not recommended by authors of late sixteenth-century letter-writing manuals. However, allusions to these modes of address do appear in other texts. An epigram by Sir John Harrington, entitled *The Author to his Wife, of a Woman's Eloquence*, offers a comic portrait of an aristocratic marriage in the last quarter of the sixteenth century:

¹⁶⁶D.S. Brewer, ed., *Malory: The Morte Darthur* (London, 1989), pp. 15-18.

¹⁶⁷Ibid.

¹⁶⁸Richard Beadle, ed., *The York Plays* (London, 1982), p. 85.

¹⁶⁹She boasts 'Was nevir juge in this Jurie of so jocounde generacion, Nor of so joifull geneologie to gentrys enioyned, As yhe, my duke doughty'. Beadle, ed., *York Plays* (London, 1982), p. 255 (Play 30, ll. 28-30).

¹⁷⁰This can also be seen in many other texts. See, for example, the discussion between the knight and his wife at the end of both translations of *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, and the dialogue between Blanchardyn and Eglantine. M.Y. Offord, ed., *The Book of the Knight of the Tower translated by William Caxton*, EETS s. s. 2 (1971), pp. 163-75; Thomas Wright, ed., *Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, EETS o.s. 33 (1868), pp. 171-89; L. Kellner, *Caxton's Blanchardyn and Eglantine, c.1489*, EETS e.s. 58 (1890), p. xxix-xxx.

My Mall, I mark that when you mean to proue me
 To buy a Veluet gowne, or some rich border,
 Thou calst me good sweet heart, thou swearst to loue me.¹⁷¹

This verse is clearly humorous in intent, yet the number of parallels between these lines and contemporary letters is suggestive; here we see not just the informal pronoun, and the use of the diminutive, but the expression 'sweet heart' applied by wife to husband. Another sidelight on the marital mores of the time is provided by a writer working in a different genre. In the third act of his tragedy *Antonio's Revenge* John Marston presents us with an old woman's reminiscences about her marital career:

I have had four husbands myself. The first I called 'Sweet Duck', the second 'Dear Heart', the third 'Pretty Pug'; but the fourth, most sweet, dear, pretty all in all; he was the very cokall of a husband.¹⁷²

The portrait of this seventeenth-century Wife of Bath is satirical in intent. However, in order to function effectively satire must always be precise in its social observation; as in Harington's verse many of the terms mentioned here are those with which we are familiar from contemporary letters.

The final piece of evidence is drawn from a prescriptive text. As Stone has noted, in his treatise *Of Domesticall Duties* of 1622 William Gouge, a puritan theologian, devotes considerable space to describing the correct mode of address between husband and wife. Addressing husbands, he criticises the use of 'Christian names contracted, as Sal, Mal, Besse, Nan' as being too disrespectful.¹⁷³ His instructions to wives are even more austere. Christian names are outlawed, as are epithets such as 'Sweet', 'Heart', 'Sweet-heart' and 'Love'; these speak too strongly of a 'wanton familiarity'. Worse still are contracted names, such as those used by Maria Thynne and Dorothy Gawdy:

Christian names, as Iohn, Thomas, William, Henry &c. if they be contracted (as many vse to contract them thus Iacke, Tom, Will, Hall) they are 'vnseemly:

¹⁷¹'The Author to his wife, of a womans eloquence' in John Harington, *The most elegant and witty epigrams* (London, 1618), Epigram 25 (this text is unpaginated).

¹⁷²John Marston, *Antonio's Revenge*, ed., W. Reavley Gair (Manchester and Maryland, 1978), Act III., iv., ll. 1-6.

¹⁷³William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties: Eight Treatises* (London, 1622), Treatise 4, p. 372.

servants are vsually so called.¹⁷⁴

Instead, the form which he prescribe is that which gentry wives used up to the end of the sixteenth century: 'Master' with the surname. Stone sees Gouge's stricture as evidence of a growing authoritarianism in the home.¹⁷⁵ But given the tone of the passage ('as many vse to') and viewed in the context of the epistolary evidence, Gouge is perhaps best seen as an isolated critic of practices which were fast gaining acceptance.

When we turn to parent-child relations, the evidence that changes reflect wider linguistic or social developments is not quite so overwhelming. Yet it too is suggestive. Fifteenth-century letters suggest that adult children of lesser status, particularly perhaps those of mercantile rank, could be addressed by the less respectful 'thou'. Aristocratic children, on the other hand, are always called 'you' by their parents. Contemporary texts show that 'thou' was the usual mode of address to younger children, and also to those of mean status. In the mystery cycles, for example, Abraham consistently addresses the young Isaac as 'thou'.¹⁷⁶ In the *York Play* Noah's wife, who, as we have seen, seems to be characterized as far from courtly, addresses her adult sons in the same fashion.¹⁷⁷ In more clearly aristocratic texts, however, 'you' is often used instead of the more familiar form. It is true that in the fifteenth-century romance *Emaré*, aristocratic children are called 'thou' by their elders, and this is also the form in which a knight addresses his daughter in Caxton's translation of the *Book of the Knight of the Tower*.¹⁷⁸ But in a more idiomatic translation produced slightly earlier in the same century, however, the same

¹⁷⁴Ibid., Treatise 3, p. 283.

¹⁷⁵Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (abridged edn., Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 139.

¹⁷⁶Beadle, ed., *The York Plays*, pp. 93-8; M. Stevens and A.C. Cawley, eds., *The Towneley Plays*, 2 vols. EETS s.s. 13-14 (1994):I, pp. 43-48; Stephen Specter, ed., *The N-Town Play*, 2 vols. EETS s. s. 11-12 (1991):I, pp. 51, 53-55, 57-58.

¹⁷⁷Beadle, ed., *The York Plays*, p. 84.

¹⁷⁸'Emaré' in Maldwyn Mills, ed., *Six Middle English Romances* (London, 1973), pp. 52-53, 58; Offord, ed., *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, p. 55.

passage represents the damsel's parents using the more formal 'you' rather than 'thou'.¹⁷⁹ In *The Three Kings' Sons* royal offspring are addressed by their parents in the more respectful form.¹⁸⁰ In Malory this is also the style used by parents to children; this is how Sir Ector addresses his stepson Arthur, and how Sir Lancelot greets Sir Galahad.¹⁸¹

If we move away from pronouns to consider other aspects of the systems of address, further evidence can be found to support the general trend found in letters. The *Middle English Dictionary* shows that in the later medieval period the terms 'sir' and 'dame' connoted not just 'master' and 'mistress' but 'father' and 'mother'.¹⁸² A typical example, which dates from the same period as the Paston and Stonor letters, is Jacob's greeting to his parents Rachel and Isaac in the Towneley Play 'Haue good day, sir and dame!'¹⁸³ The overlap between the vocabularies of service and kinship closely echoes the discursive organisation of letters written in the same period. In the sixteenth-century we find some indications of change. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, by the end of this century 'dame' had become obsolete as a synonym for mother.¹⁸⁴ At the same period new familiar terms for parents appear. The first known example of 'mam' dates from 1565.¹⁸⁵ 'Dad', and variants, such as 'daddie', which are explicitly identified as affectionate or childish terms, become common after 1553.¹⁸⁶ Though

¹⁷⁹Thomas Wright, ed., *Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, EETS o.s. 33 (1868), p. 48.

¹⁸⁰For example, King Charles addresses Philip: 'my sone, youre seyng is good and laudable, & wol I remembre it and take auyse vpon your exortacion'. F. J. Furnivall, ed., *The Three Kings' Sons. Part I. The Text*, EETS c.s. 67 (1895), p. 7.

¹⁸¹Malory, *Works*, Bk. I, pp. 8-9, Bk. XVII, p. 594-95.

¹⁸²*MED*, dame n.

¹⁸³Stevens and Cawley, eds., *Towneley Plays*:I, p. 51.

¹⁸⁴*OED*, dame (n.)1, sense 8. The final example dates from 1593, but as this is the only example from the sixteenth century, it may already have been archaic by this period.

¹⁸⁵*OED*, mam (n.)1

¹⁸⁶*OED*, dad (n.)1 The first reference is the following, 'What a joye shal this be unto you, when... your shall haue a pretie litle boye, runnyng up and doune your house, suche a one ..as shall call you dad, with his swete lispyng wordes'. T. Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique* (London, 1553), p. 31. J. Florio, *A Worlde of Wordes* (London, 1598), s.v. *Babbo* and *Pappa* and T. Thomas, *Dictionarum Linguae Latinae et Anglicanae* (London, 1587), s.v. *Pappas*, *Pappo* and

more difficult to chart in detail, some comparable changes can, perhaps, be seen in the language addressed to children. In his dictionary of 1611 Cotgrave offers the following translation of the French 'm'amie': 'my prettie Pug (so fooles hugging their babies, tearme them).'¹⁸⁷ The tone here suggests that the author disapproves of the term which he sees as a foolish innovation. An Elizabethan dialogue, representing a mother's visit to the nursery, seems to confirm that such 'foolish' terms were now current. The mother instructs the child's carer:

Pull off his shirt, thou art prety & fat my little darling ' bring him to me first that
I may kisse him: God send thee good rest my little boykin.¹⁸⁸

Conclusion

This has been a wide-ranging study which has explored some of the many complexities surrounding the subject of family relationships. Within the constraints of this discussion it has not proved possible to resolve all of these problems. Indeed, some of these difficulties must await the discovery and publication of a greater range of source material. In some areas, however, we have been able to make significant progress. The first conclusion which we have been able to draw is that, contrary to the view of most historians, family relationships, as expressed through correspondence, did change in the sixteenth century. The second thesis which we have demonstrated is that this change is not an illusion, but must reflect a real shift in socio-cultural attitudes. Though literacy did increase over the course of the period, the appearance of affectionate modes of writing antedates the general transition to autography. Conversely, apparently formal modes of writing are found in autograph letters at the close of the sixteenth century. Changes in generic conventions prove to be equally inadequate in explaining the growth of more sentimental, less status-orientated modes of expression. Married couples use affectionate epithets to each other in letters which are still divided according to the schema

Tatam.

¹⁸⁷R. Cotgrave, *Dictionary of the French and English Tongues* (London, 1611), s.v. *M'amie*.

¹⁸⁸Muriel St Clare Byrne, ed., *The Elizabethan Home Discovered in 2 Dialogues* (London, 1925), pp. 56-57. [From Peter Erondell's *The French Garden* (London, 1606)]

prescribed by the medieval *dictatores*. Conversely children who were clearly immersed in the teaching of humanists continue to address their parents in terms which are identical in tone, if not in precise form, to those used by their fifteenth century predecessors. The implication seems clear. As far as family relationships are concerned, the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries do seem to be significantly different to the final quarter of the latter century. In this area, if in no other, the dividing line between medieval and early modern does indeed seem to have some validity.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has presented conclusions and insights touching on a variety of subjects and issues. Constraints of space make a recapitulation of all these themes and ideas impracticable. In this final section I shall therefore confine myself to two tasks. First, I shall present a brief account of the more conclusive evidence of change which I have gathered, relating to the two centuries under study in the thesis. This will be followed by a more extended account of the gains brought by the new approaches applied to epistolary material in the thesis.

Themes

The first area of change explored in the thesis pertains to the later medieval period. Scholars have known for some time that the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were a time of social reorganisation, probably produced by the cataclysm of the Black Death. It has been noticed, for example, that new social categories emerged in this period - 'esquires' in the fourteenth century, 'gentlemen' in the fifteenth. To date, however, the precise organisation of status in linguistic terms has received comparatively little scrutiny. In particular, little attention has been paid to the penumbra of descriptive terms which qualify titles such as 'sir' and 'master' in situations of address. In this thesis it has been shown, however, that these subsidiary terms may cast important light on the social reorganisation of the period. When examined in a diachronic series, modes of address can be seen to fall into a clear pattern. Both in our discussion of epistolary conventions, and in our survey of civic petitions, we saw that salutations became more elaborate and more socially nuanced as time passed. From this observation of the simple pattern of change, we were able to move to a causal analysis.

It was clear in both contexts, that rather than corresponding with the transition from Anglo-Norman French to English, the growth in precision in the use of epithets was an ongoing process, which occurred in a series of stages. The later Anglo-Norman terms closely resembled those in the earliest English documents; the greatest changes occurred in series of documents written in the same language. The obvious conclusion to be inferred from this pattern is that these changes in vocabulary must reflect social change as much, if not more, than mere shifts in linguistic or generic convention. This discovery served as the basis of our study of civic identities, and their construction in a society in transition, but one which was

still dominated by aristocratic concepts of governance. More generally, however, it demonstrated the value of epistolary documents as sources for political history. For, rather than being governed by ossified conventions, as some commentators have implied, our study shows that epistolary sources are sensitive, if complex barometers of changing socio-cultural ideals.

Our other two conclusions apply not to transformation in the fifteenth century, but rather to changes which occur across the conventional late medieval/early modern divide. The first of these relates to female epistolarity, an area in which the lack of contact between scholars studying the two periods has distorted understanding of the true chronology. Students of the later medieval period have noticed the comparative weakness of female literacy, but have tended to dismiss this as the product of wider trends in society rather than as the simple result of gender discrimination. It has been noted, for example, that literacy rates (understood as the ability to write) were in general comparatively low, and that aristocrats regarded writing in their own hands as a degrading task. Scholars of the early modern period, by contrast, have placed considerable emphasis on the disadvantages suffered by women as a sex at a time when literacy among men was increasing rapidly. They have drawn particular attention to the constraints which educational reformers such as Vives placed on the scope of female education. If we consider female ability across the two centuries, however, rather than comparing women's ability to that of men in each period, it becomes clear that the impact of sixteenth-century reforms has been understated. In the fifteenth century women whose husbands and sons were very competent writers did no more than sign their names at the foot of their letters. In the sixteenth century, by contrast, a significant proportion of women pen entire letters in their own hands. Moreover, where fifteenth century women usually write tremulously, many of their successors display elegant hands which must be the result of a serious programme of study. If we consider the advice literature of the two periods, the contrast is equally clear. Medieval writers such as Philippe de Navarre and the Knight of the Tower advised parents against teaching their daughters to write. Vives and Hyrde recommended that women adhere to simple, pious forms of literacy, and limit their study to the vernacular, but did not object to female literacy on principle.

The second area in which the broad time-frame has produced new insights is in our

understanding of family relationships. As we saw above, two theories have been proposed to explain differences in family correspondence written in the sixteenth, as opposed to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The first is the increase in literacy, and the possibility which it offered for 'epistolary privacy'. The second theory is that the change in modes of expression reflects the growing influence of humanist letter-writing pedagogy. A careful examination of the relationship between language and modes of composition revealed the first theory to be inadequate. Our study of letters written during the century and half preceding the arrival of humanist epistolography on British shores has exposed the second to be equally unconvincing. From this study we have seen that some letters from husbands to wives were already quite affectionate in their mode of expression in the later fifteenth century, and that more examples of this kind can be found in the first half of the sixteenth century, before humanism had made much impact on letter-writing styles. Conversely, despite the condemnation of humanists, letters written by some wives to their husbands, and by most children to their parents in the final quarter of the sixteenth century, are just as deferential, and place just as much emphasis on status as those written a hundred years earlier. By examining the period as a continuous whole, we have been able to expose the supposed contrast between a status-obsessed Middle Ages, and a modern, affective sixteenth century as overly simplistic. However, we have also shown that important changes did occur in social organisation over the course of the two centuries.

Methodology

i. Material Practices.

In the introduction to the thesis we argued for a more rounded approach to letters as a source; we suggested that they should be considered and understood not just as literary but as material artefacts. This approach has brought gains in a number of areas. By examining the layout of letters, and their decoration, we were able to confirm the growing importance of visual perception in the process of letter-reception. Detailed study of seals used to close letters in the civic arena yielded important insights into the identity of the writers, complementing the information which was gleaned from the language of the documents. In relation to family letters, we saw that seal evidence confirmed the impression created in other aspects of the documents, that family letters were not strongly distinguished from

missives of other types in this period. Most productive, however, was the extended examination of the use of the autograph in letters composed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This survey demonstrated that rather than being a natural product of the spread of literacy, autography, and its alternative, dictation, have their own distinct socio-cultural histories. Letters exchanged by intimates are not written in the autograph as soon as writers had the ability to compose in this mode. Instead, the shift to the autograph seems to occur somewhat later, and to be produced by two wider cultural factors. One of these is the revival of the concept of the individual, or perhaps more precisely the idea of individual literary style, closely associated with humanist educational reforms of the sixteenth century. The second is a wider social change - an apparent transition from a broad conviviality which comprehended all members of the household, towards a narrower sense of intimacy, which was limited to the married couple and their children. This seems to have rendered the use of servants as amanuenses increasingly undesirable when letters were directed to spouses and children. Only by examining the pattern of dictation and autography in detail, and alongside other factors such as style and vocabulary, was it possible to unravel these different factors. Only by considering letters as material as well as linguistic sources could these relationships be understood.

ii. Language and Letters.

The emphasis on the material aspects of letters and the broad temporal perspective have both been important aspects of this thesis. However, the most important innovation in this study has been the suggestion that historians should deploy literary and linguistic approaches to letters in order to understand them fully as a source. Even more than the two methodological areas which we have discussed to this point, this approach has produced new insights both into letters and into the socio-cultural history of the period under study. These new insights can be divided into three broad groups, which correspond to the main categories of linguistic analysis which have been used over the course of the thesis.

Prose style

Hitherto, style has been considered almost exclusively as a literary phenomenon; scholars have paid little attention to the social ramifications of the way in which texts are constructed

at the level of the phrase or the sentence. Though the thesis has only been able to offer a preliminary survey of what is a very complex subject, it has proved possible to draw some general conclusions, which offer a certain corrective to past assumptions. First, I have argued that fifteenth-century writers organised their style in quite sophisticated ways and according to a variety of different criteria. The first of these, and the only factor generally discussed by scholars, is the status of the addressee: letters to kings or petitions submitted to civic governors tend to be more syntactically complex than texts intended for servants, or those whose status was comparatively mean in absolute terms. Two other factors also seem to be of importance, however. First, writers vary their style according to subject: letters which report diplomatic encounters or legal affairs tend to be more elaborate than those which describe everyday transactions, whether these latter concern the payment of the king's expenses or the purchase of provisions for a gentry household. The second factor, which is the most neglected by scholars, is the identity of the writer. Noble writers often use a ceremonious style even when writing to peers, intimates, or social inferiors, suggesting that the use of the style reflects their own standing as much as their relationship to the addressee. Conversely, either because they lacked the competence, or because they felt it inappropriate to their status, some correspondents or petitioners of comparatively lowly rank use a very simple writing style even when addressing eminent addressees. Medieval letters follow the rules of sociolinguistic interaction as much as they do the prescriptions of the *dictatores*; the selection of language reflects the identity of the speaker as much as it does the subject of discourse or the person of the addressee.

Some tentative correction can also be offered to the image sometimes presented of the way in which written discourse was organised in the following century. A reading of the sixteenth-century epistolary theory might lead us to expect a system of style very different to that found in the preceding two centuries. In some respects this expectation is realised; some correspondents do write periodic sentences influenced by the style of classical authors such as Cicero or Quintilian. Change is neither sudden nor absolute, however. First, curial prose continues to be the dominant style in the letters of the nobility until the middle of the sixteenth century, while those of the gentry remain as 'colloquial' or unstructured as those of the previous century. Second, and more important, changes in the second half of the century do not conform to the models outlined by epistolary theorists. According to writers such as Celtis and Erasmus, letters should no longer be organised according to the status

of the addressee, but should take into account various factors such as the age, temperament and profession, as well as the subject under discussion. Vives and Justus Lipsius went further, arguing that letters as a genre called for a familiar, conversational mode of writing.

What we find in practice, however, is that the older habit of organising style according to status is quite resilient. Thus Elizabeth I wrote letters to her brother and elder sister in long, syntactically complex sentences. Catherine Parr writes to both Henry VII and Thomas Seymour using rhetorical figures and lexical doublets, though as husbands they would seem more appropriately addressed in the conversational terms which were prescribed between intimates. Other correspondents, and perhaps particularly those of more humble status, write in a simple, even disjointed style. As in the fifteenth century, it is difficult to gauge whether this second mode of writing reflects lack of competence or more self-conscious choice on the part of these writers. The effect, however, is the same; in practice the fifteenth century pattern, whereby style reflects the social identity of the writer as much as the addressee, remains in place.

Lexis

The second category of language which has been carefully scrutinised over the course of this study is lexis or vocabulary. By considering items of vocabulary very carefully, and by placing them in their historical context, a number of new observations have been made. As we have seen, one area in which our understanding has been furthered is that of status terms and their inter-relationship. A second area in which the identification of the precise connotations of the lexical items is useful to the historian is in examining the construction of identities. For example, we have seen that the Barber Surgeons of London and the civic authorities of York used terms which are rare in the epistolary context, but which occur in chivalric texts of the period. This suggests that these writers were deploying vocabulary with prestigious social overtones in order to present an image of themselves as accomplished and courtly. Other writers use words which are differently privileged in order to produce a similar effect. Members of the nobility and the mayor and aldermen of London appear to use a higher proportion of recent loan-words from French than many of their contemporaries. These words - 'cronicable', 'affectuously', 'misdemeaninge' - must have struck contemporaries as newfangled or 'posh', creating an impression of the writer as authoritative and worthy of respect. In the sixteenth century comparable effects could be

achieved through the use of different terms. Writers such as Otwell Johnson and Philip Gawdy make heavy use of neologisms derived from Latin. Here once again the aim must be to project an image of accomplishment, though in this case it is perhaps a claim based on erudition rather than on social refinement which is aimed at.

In some ways more revealing still, from a sociolinguistic point of view, are the examples where we can see correspondents 'trading down' lexically, that is using vocabulary which is not that which we would predict from their status. Thomas Stonor use of the word 'lemman' to describe his wife, rather than the term 'lady' used by other aristocrats both in literary texts and in other letters, seems to represent a deliberate shift in register, suggestive of informality of intimacy. Henry VIII's reference to Ann Boleyn's breasts as 'dukkes', and Sabine Johnson's mention of her 'brats' seem to fall into the same category: language switching used to indicate trust and affection. Though in some ways more complex, the use of the second person pronoun 'thou' falls into a similar pattern. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries this mode of address was eschewed by the 'courtly classes' who had adopted the plural form along with Anglo-Norman as a sign of social refinement. The rise of the use of the 'thou' form in letters from parents to children and from husbands and wives seems to show the recession of the importance of status in transactions between members of the nuclear family.

Discourse

The final linguistic category explored in this thesis is rhetoric or 'discourse', that is the way in which terms occur in set or repeated patterns associated with particular subjects or speech contexts. Recently it has been suggested that the image of later medieval society as one in which vertical bonds were based on personal loyalty or emotional ties may be an illusion created by an over-reliance on the testimony of romances and chivalric literature.¹ However, in the comparatively pragmatic interaction between lords and servants which is revealed in letters, it is clear that emotion did in fact occupy a central conceptual space. Lords ask that their 'welbeloved' retainers undertake actions 'for the love of us'. Servants thank their masters for the 'tenderness' and 'kindness' which they have been shown, and proffer their

¹Susan Reynolds, in an unpublished paper delivered in the University of York History Seminar series 1999. See a fuller statement of the argument in Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: the Medieval Evidence*

'affection' in return for these personal favours. Indeed, so fully does the discourse of service occupy the territory of emotion, that it is difficult in this period to descry any distinct rhetoric of heterosexual love or of family feeling. In letters concerning courtship the language of 'courtly love' is used, but this discourse, with its pledges of loyalty and devotion, is itself a version of the rhetoric of feudal service. In letters between aristocratic family members the expressions used are the same as those which occur in transactions between lords and their retainers. Children thank their parents for their 'kindness' and 'tenderness', signing as servants. Parents make requests of their children 'for the love of us' or as 'honour' or 'trust' is reposed in them. Not until the sixteenth century does a separate discourse of family, based on private jokes, affectionate diminutives and statements of personal concern for the addressee, begin to develop.

Susan Reynolds may have understated the importance of the concepts of emotion and personal honour in transactions between lords and their servants. She is correct, however, in suggesting that other rhetorical systems or strategies also existed in this period, through which relationship between superiors and inferiors could be expressed. Indeed, these latter seem sometimes to contradict, or even to undermine, claims of 'feudal' allegiance. Petitioners at Bristol presented themselves as the servants of the civic authorities, offering to pray for their personal prosperity or welfare. However, citizens in other towns appear to have understood their relationship to their governors somewhat differently. In 1474/5 the commons of York demanded that all chamberlains of the city serve in the lower office of bridgmaster. This request was based on the following statement:

for alsmuch as we ben all one bodye corporate, we thynke that we be all inlike prevaliged of the commonalte, which has borne none office in the cite.²

Petitioners at Coventry took a slightly different tack, reminding the governors not of the authority of the citizenry, but of their obligations as elected officers to represent public rather than the private interests of lordship:

for-alsomyche as hit is necessarie & nedefull to euery gouernour of Cite & of Town to se suche rule & gouernaunse may be hadde the whiche the kynges peapull may be truly rulede & demened.³

A similar distinction can be seen between the way in which the governors of York and London transacted business with external authorities. London positioned itself within the discourse of aristocratic service; the governors emphasised their devotion to the physical person of the king, and like courtiers offered their services to others as 'a mean to the king's grace'. York, by contrast, emphasised the 'democratic' nature of their authority; they depicted their power as arising from, and pledged towards, the welfare of the citizenry of the city as much as the king. Indeed, when the king contested the decision of the governors to dismiss their clerk, they responded that this action conformed to their legal rights - the 'liberties and grauntes' which had been conceded by the crown over previous centuries. They also defended their decision on the grounds that it had been taken by the 'hole and common assent' of the citizens, and conformed to 'the wele and profit' of the city.

Future Research

In the introduction to the thesis we noted the relative poverty of scholarship on material

²Maud Sellars, ed., *York Memorandum Book*, 2 vols., Surtees Society 120 and 125 (1912-15):II, p. 246.

³*CLB*:I, pp. 180-81.

aspects of letters; future research might be profitable in many areas here. In particular, women's seals, and those belonging to individuals of lower social status, would reward closer scrutiny. As far as the use of close-reading techniques, and socio-linguistic approaches are concerned, the possibilities for future applications are greater still. The first, and perhaps least obvious possibility here is the extension of our understanding of literary texts. Part of the methodology of this thesis has consisted in reading letters in the light of the language used in more narrowly literary texts written in the same period. However, although the language of such texts derives from contemporary social discourses, literary scholars are often surprisingly ignorant of the way in which language functions in documentary texts of the same period. A neat example of how knowledge of historical sources can illuminate literary texts is found in Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Following the death of Arthur, Guinevere and Sir Launcelot meet for the last time. During their painful encounter the Queen urges:

And there[f]ore, sir Launcelot, I requyre the and besech the hartily, for all the lo[v]e that ever was betwyxt us, that thou never se me no more in the visayge.⁴

Pronominal usage in this period has been closely studied; the affective import of the shift to the 'thou' form is therefore clear. Less apparent, however, is the significance of the other lexical choices made in this passage. From letters we see that the verbs 'require' and 'beseech' are an extremely unusual verbal combination. 'Require', on the one hand, forms part of the vocabulary of lordly command, and is invariably paired with the verbs 'will' and 'charge'. 'Beseech' on the other, is the verb used by the weakest or most deferential writers; it occurs in petitions directed to those of great prestige, and by children writing to aristocratic parents. Malory's pairing of these terms would therefore have struck his readers as discordant; it seems to create effects on at least two levels. First, it suggests the heroine's emotional vacillation at this moment of crisis. Guinevere begins coldly, in a tone of authoritative command, but suddenly loses her composure, switching to a desperate emotional register. Second, and more broadly, this unnatural coupling evokes the inappropriacy or socially divisive character of the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere. It encapsulates the discordancy between the couple's status as lovers, and thus equals, on the one hand, and their roles as lord and servant, and thus superior and inferior,

⁴Eugene Vinaver, ed., *Malory: Works* (one vol. text of second edn, Oxford, 1971), Book XXI, p. 720.

on the other. Without a knowledge of the resonance of these lexical items in contemporary historical discourses or genres, such subtle authorial effects are invisible to the modern reader.

A more obvious application for the approaches used in this thesis would be to use them to ask different historical questions of these or comparable corpora of material. One issue which might usefully be explored is that of 'subjectivity'. For the most part past arguments concerning changing concepts of the self have been based on studies of journals or autobiographies. However, letters are also a genre in which individuals are required to represent themselves to others. Analysis of style and lexis concentrating on the degree of originality could therefore make an important contribution to this subject. Another topic which might be illuminated through the close linguistic study of letters is gender. Over recent decades sociolinguists have debated whether the women in contemporary societies speak differently to men.⁵ Letters provide a rich corpus for the investigation of possible differences in lexical choice between sexes in past time. Still more interesting is the potential which they offer for analysing syntax and rhetoric. Do women express requests more cautiously or deferentially than men of equivalent status? Do they make their claims to satisfaction on the basis of concepts such as honour and trust, or is a different repertoire in play in female-authored documents?

The final, and perhaps most promising avenue into which these new ideas could be channelled is rather different - the application of these approaches to different bodies of material. Journals, diaries and court records are obvious sources for the Early Modern period. For the medieval period, petitions, notes and memoranda, both public and private, remain under-explored sources, which might be made to yield many new insights to the historian if subjected to more rigorous linguistic analysis. As we noted in chapter five, however, a substantial number of letters from this period have yet to receive much scholarly attention, both because they are unpublished and because many are located in private archives. This is likely also to be true of later letters. All of these bodies of material could be subjected to forms of analysis like those propounded in this thesis with great success.

⁵Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (Basingstoke and London, 1985); Jennifer Coates and Deborah Cameron, eds., *Women in their Speech Communities* (Harlow and New York, 1988).

lene Joseph who tolde you pis
how hadde ze wittermit of pis dede

maria.

Joseph

In Jungeff brighte put come fro blisse
this tythandis tolde with outen drede
And wakend me oute of my slepe
put comely childe fro cares to lepe
And bad me flee On to Egipte
with houn and yet
And settis I dred me fore
to make any smale troye
Or tyme put I come pure

maria.

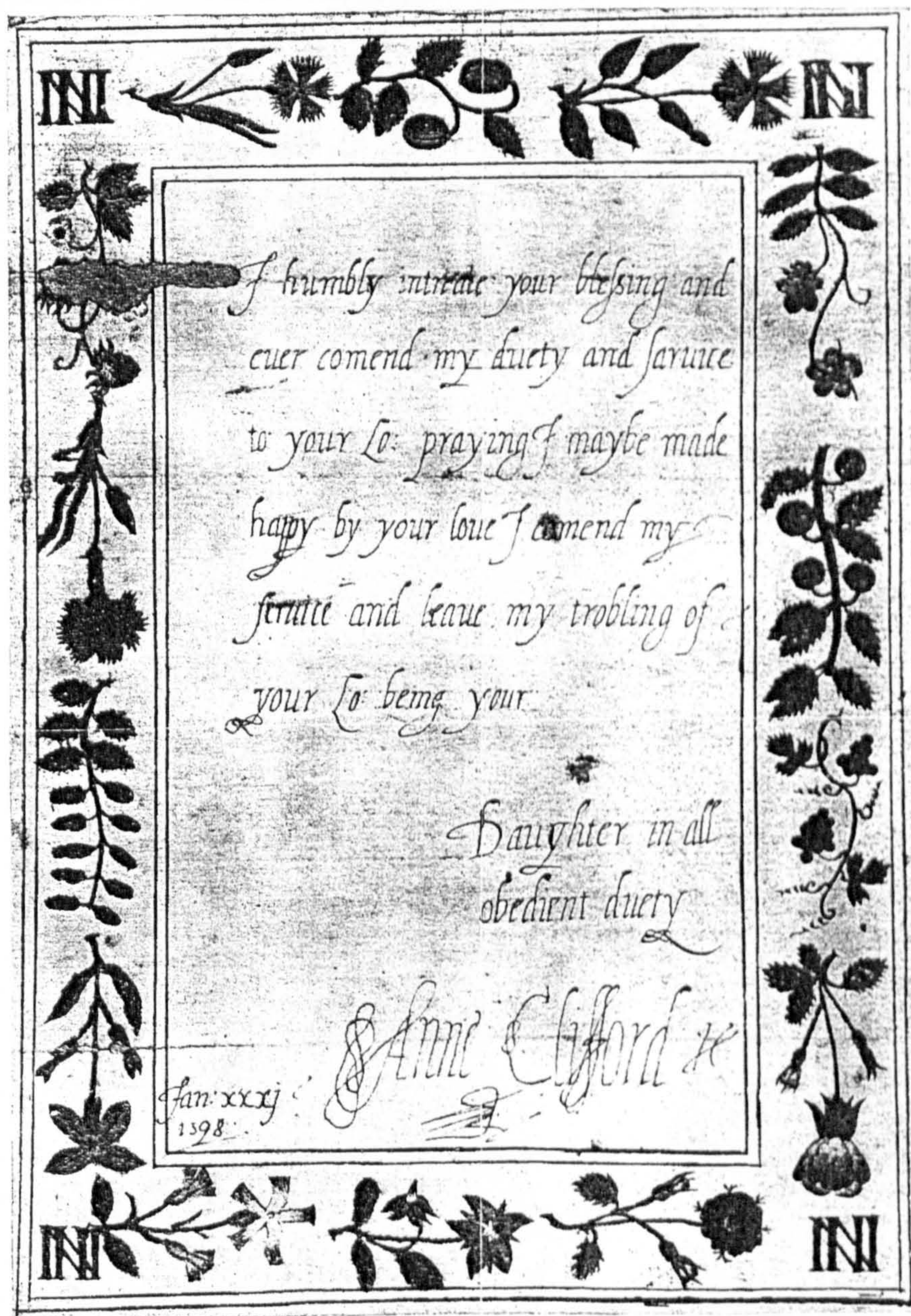
What dyles yei at my carne
Elike harmes hym for to hete
Alas why shulde I threne
my sone his lyffe so swete
his harte myght to be ful fare
In stike a foode hym to for fare
pat nevyn did ill And here wate why
hym for to spilt
I ware full wille of wine
my sone and he shulde dye
And I have but hym allone

Joseph.

We lene marie dowry late be
I pray ye lene of thy dymne
And funde ye furthe faste for to flee
A way with hym for to wyne
That no mysthene on hym be tyde
Nor none unshappe in no lyn side
We way nor stete to fles hym
pat we non mete

Plate 3: A folio from a fifteenth-century literary manuscript

Plate 4: An autograph letter from Anne Clifford to her father



LETTER FROM LADY ANNE CLIFFORD TO HER FATHER,
written when a girl of 8 years old, on January 31st, 1598,
the day succeeding her own birthday

Plate 5: A letter from Lord Lisle to his wife Honor

My most sweet heart in my most hearty hope
 I commend me unto you praying you referre to the
 the 10 day of the month of June to see how healthly
 you are with regard to the death of your father
 I find you as yet best husbandry if you have
 need to me regard your friend and love to give
 of I forget myself well so far as at your
 most make his and wife of my self another
 so that by your most hearty love well from
 the 10 day of December your most loving husband
 for and

As witness
 your most loving husband
 John Lisle

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S.P. 3 / 1					
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my letter is full pleas'd you to ordain if you be glad
to follow the same or any part thereof that you
shall command, And in that I did not write
unto you at the first touching the forfeit was
because I understood you were displeas'd and
kept your silence. So here for the furtherance
of my master's cause so bold to make another
notice of my remembrance. And I trust you
will pardon. And thus the blessed Trinity
preserve you to thousands of years long life and
prosperous reign to his pleasure. Written at
Melton the 14th day of July

ye owed to command
Lisle

Plate 7: An autograph letter from George Basset to his mother and stepfather Lord and Lady Lisle

George Basset to Lord and Lady Lisle (No. 549, p.103)

623

549^{no}

Right honorable and my muste dere and singler goodde ladye
and ladye in my muste humble maner I recomaunde me vnto your
bestthyngs to haue yo^r dailye blessinge, and to here of yo^r goodde
and prospere hylth, for the consideratione of wherby I praye
dailye vnto almyghty godde I restrepe youe by thys my
and let that my Maist^r and my ladye be in goodde hylth,
to wherby any myghte becomde. Finally I besyche
yo^r lordshyppe and ladyshyppe to haue me heartelye receyued
vnto my brother and systre. And thus I praye godde to conserue
yo^r lordshyppe and ladyshyppe doe in goodde longe and
prospere hylth wth hono^r. ffraunce wooburne the
firste daye of Julye 37

By yo^r humble and
owne sonne George
Basset

Plate 8: An autograph letter from Mary Basset to her mother Lady Lisle

Madame je me recommande tres humblement a la
bonne grace de monsieur mon pere et de de vous
madame i me souviens bien de estre se long temps sans
avoir de vos bonnes nouvelles par celle bien ayse de se
que ~~me~~ madame de barab vous envoi deono il
me estoit a abbeylle que vous m'avez par lettre
messager le parodi de quoy par esto fait madame
je vous remercie tres humblement de l'lo en quoy vous m'avez
envoye par jehan ~~me~~ par madame de barab que dit recevoir
par abbeylle admy que je vous envoie de mes nouvelles
Madame je vous supplie me contenez fero se bien de
m'envoyer une par de madame de barab a madame et un
pere pour me elle ne par de l'lo d'anglois se bon
plest un en amoro je seroye bien ayse il ne bon gentilhomme
de me l'oye un que me par de noisone une par et une
pere de soulper je seroye bien ayse que l'un en se par
se par vous par que i par let je voy que madame
de barab vous ayt escript par quelque dyent comant
par monsieur d'aymonet et un l'lo bon par par son
par l'lo lettre que je vous escript par par que
par vous demander je par un par par l'lo par par
et me par de noisone que je ven bien par par
l'lo bon d'aymonet que l'lo a me par me par par
par de par de vous demander par par l'lo par de
par par par madame vous par par par
longue par de par se de par

Mademoiselle d'aymonet se recommande
tres humblement a vostre grace

Vostre tres humble et bon
obedant filz
mario basset

Plate 9: A letter from Elizabeth Stonor to her husband Sir William Stonor with an autograph subscription

I pray as my godly

I praye for your honor and wellthyffnit and in daily best & comde of honde I comande me
 unto you in the most grette wyse being more desyryng to see you off your owne wylle than
 I praye god to change to London. Since you have departed I have had a token from you by which
 I my lorde Cantuarburie and I have sent my lorde Cantuarburie and my lorde Cantuarburie
 maunde me to do sturche as I praye that you take the sturche under sturche that you have off
 lorde Cantuarburie in to the towne since you departed all the sturche under sturche that you
 have taken departed as to more as I praye that you take the sturche under sturche that you
 and quilled departed all so and I praye you take the sturche under sturche that you
 and I praye to myghte a pene me for now some thinge that you have off sturche under sturche
 knowe well that I have you quilled a quilled that you have off sturche under sturche
 since you have departed that you have off sturche under sturche that you have off sturche
 to more as I praye that you take the sturche under sturche that you have off sturche
 that you have off sturche that you have off sturche that you have off sturche
 at the towne that you have off sturche that you have off sturche
 London as London the way off sturche

I thinkes God I am

By your owne wyll
 Elizabeth Stonor

I praye for the welfare of the
 which well sundry of blessed by god

Done

My chere good and frendlye ladye
 I receyved your letter whiche I have
 receyved with thankes and joye and
 am glad to hear that you are
 well and that you have had
 some payntment and so I hope
 that you will be better in
 some tyme. I have not yett
 receyved your letter whiche
 you wrote me by George Rott
 concerning the matter of the
 money whiche you lent me
 and I am sorry that I have
 not yett receyved it. I have
 written to George Rott that
 he should pay you the money
 as soon as he can. I hope
 that you will be satisfied
 with this. I am your
 frendlye servant
 George Rott

Honore Lisle
 To the Honore Lisle
 and her husband
 George Rott

George Rott

PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE, LONDON

Plate 13: A letter bearing the autograph signature of Lady Honor Lisle

Plate 14: The Common Seal of London (Barons' Seal)



* OBVERSE AND ORIGINAL REVERSE OF THE SEAL OF THE CITY OF LONDON.



Plate 15: The first Great Seal of Henry III

Plate 16: The Mayoral Seals of the city London



FIRST MAYORALTY SEAL OF THE CITY OF LONDON.



SECOND MAYORALTY SEAL OF THE CITY OF LONDON.
MADE IN 1381.

Plate 17: Edward III's Brétigny Seal



Plate 18: The Common Seal of Cologne, and the first and second Common Seals of Mainz

Abb. 1
Ältestes Siegel
der Stadt Köln



Abb. 2
Ältestes Siegel
der Stadt Mainz



Abb. 3
Zweites Siegel
der Stadt Mainz

Plate 19: The Common Seal of the city of Shrewsbury

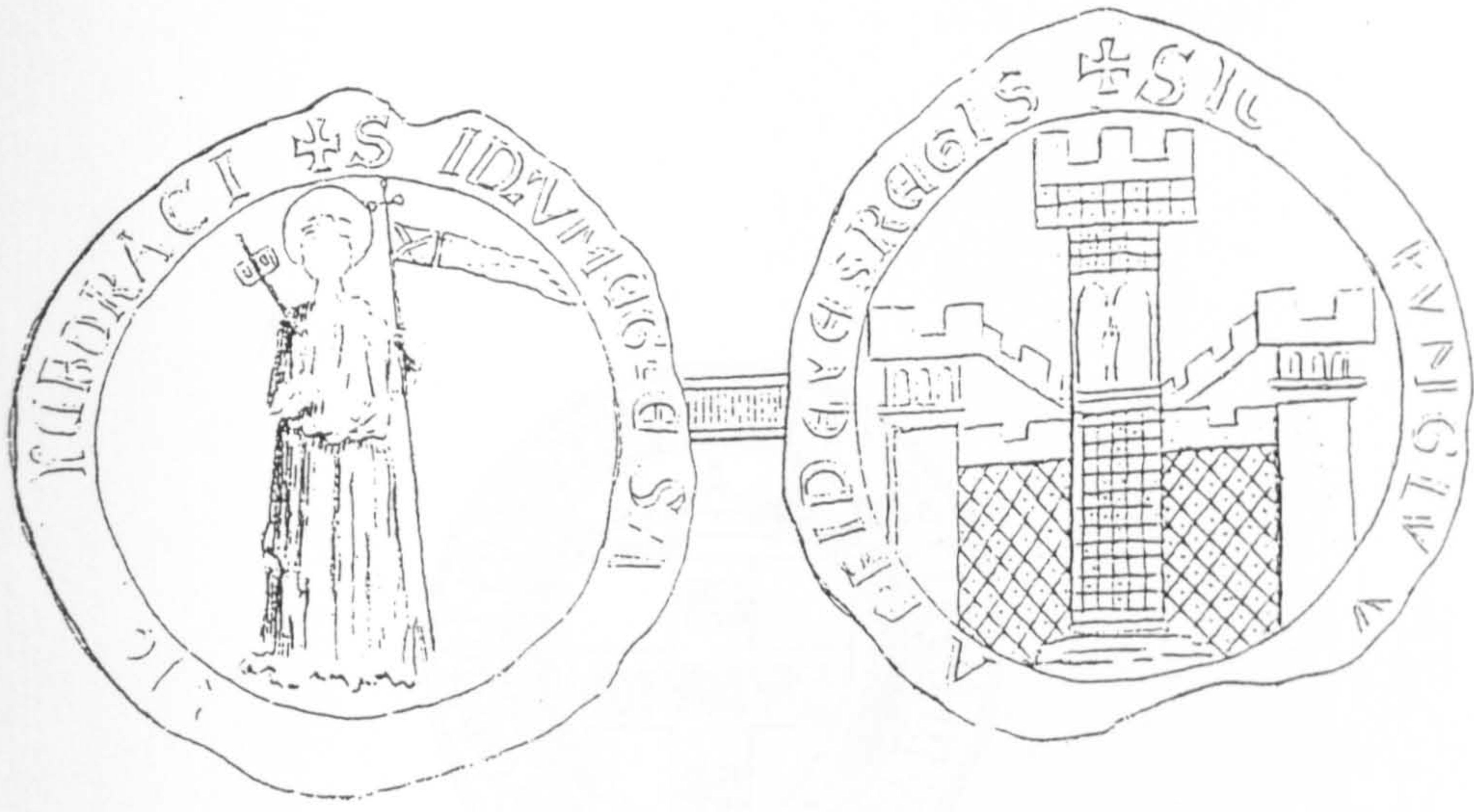


Plate 20: The seal of Emperor Ludwig of Bavaria



37 Seal of the Emperor Ludwig the Bavarian, designed for seals struck in gold. It was first used in 1328, the year of his coronation at Rome, and the monuments representing the city may have been chosen to refer to this and to other events of his stay there. No fewer than twelve identifiable monuments appear, dominated, top centre, by the Colosseum.

A



B



Plate 21: The first and second Common Seals of York

Plate 22: The Mayoral Seal and Statute Merchant Seal of York

PLATE XXV

A.



B.

2



Plate 23: The Common Seals of the cities of Warwick and Pontefract

PLATE XXVI

XIVth cent.



51



52

Pontefract.
Warwick.

Plate 24: The Common Seal of Winchelsea

PLATE X

XIIIth cent.



19



20

Winchelsea.

ABBREVIATIONS

- ACE* John H. Fisher, Malcolm Richardson and Jane L. Fisher, eds., *An Anthology of Chancery English* (Knoxville, 1984)
- BL* London, British Library
- CL* Alison Hanham, ed., *The Cely Letters, 1472-1488*, EETS 273 (1975)
- EETS* Early English Text Society
e.s. Extra Series
o.s. Original Series
- HB* Lorraine C. Attreed, ed., *The York House Books 1461-1490*, 2 vols. (Stroud, 1991).
- HMC* Reports of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts
- LALME* Angus McIntosh et al., *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*, 4 vols. (Aberdeen, 1986)
- MED* Hans Kurath et al., eds., *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1952-)
- OED* J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (London, 1989)
- NBL* G. M. Baker, R. W. Kenny and A. Hassell Smith, eds., *The Papers of Nathaniel Bacon of Stiffkey*, 4 vols. Norfolk Record Society 46, 49, 53 and 64 (1979-2000)
- PL* Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1971-76)
- PRO* London, Public Record Office
- SL* Christine Carpenter, ed., *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers* (Cambridge, 1996)

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Public Record Office

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SP3
SP46

Oxford

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York

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