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Robert Mannyng and the Imagined Reading Communities for *Handlyng Synne*
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The following essay will engage with some methodologically challenging tasks. Its aim is to discuss the utilities that pastoral texts such as *Handlyng Synne* may have served, or – much more problematically in terms of codicological enquiry’s usual reliance on manuscript evidence – those they were *intended* by its author to serve. There was a scholarly tendency in the past to merely classify pastoral texts: to organise them according to type, but to fail to explore the ways in which such texts might have been intended to function among reading communities. This is for good reason – excavating the utilities of texts that have long since fallen out of active use among readers and hearers is by no means straightforward. Even more problematic then is analysing the ways in which authors predicted their texts would be accessed by the audiences that they imagined for their texts. Herein is a crucial and intractable problem, in that there is clearly a difference between the actual utilities religious texts served – evidenced obliquely in the extant manuscript record, and the intentions or imaginings of the original author. As Paul Strohm states:

[T]he observer of texts cannot fail to notice their ups and downs, their surprising changes in fortune, their varied and unpredictable uses. These vicissitudes register the presence of centers of authority beyond textual bounds, the ultimate reliance of a text upon those contending processes that determine reception and circulation, interpretation and application.¹

It is also almost certainly the case with a work as long and complex as *Handlyng Synne*, that the text was always intended to serve multiple utilities, and perhaps, to reach various audiences too. It is into this epistemological quandary that the following essay will delve. So, before I continue to set out some of these imponderables, I will briefly introduce *Handlyng Synne*, to supply some of the background to this text.

Introducing *Handlyng Synne*

¹ Paul Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 7.

Handlyng Synne is an English vernacular adaptation of *Manuel des Péchés*, a thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman work usually attributed to William of Waddington (perhaps the seneschal of Walter de Grey, archbishop of York, 1215-55). The English adaptation is around 12,600 lines in length and it emulates the basic structure of an early version of the *Manuel*.² Through its use of tales, commentary, diatribe and anecdote, it expounds on areas of basic catechesis: the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, Sacrilege, the Seven Sacraments, the Twelve Points of Shrift and the Twelve Graces of Shrift.³ These sections correspond to books 2-5 and 7 of the *Manuel*. The English version represents a translation of only half of the 8,500 lines in the *Manuel*'s books intact, contains twelve freshly added tales (some with no other traceable written precedent) and interpolates a considerable amount of original didactic commentary and direction into the text. Nine of the tales in the French original are excluded and two other tales contained in the *Manuel* appear to have been retranslated from differing sources.⁴

Handlyng Synne was written by a man who identifies himself as Robert Mannyng. The author appears to reveal that he wrote the work in Sempringham priory, a double house of Gilbertine canons and nuns in South Lincolnshire, where he tells us he was

² All references from *Handlyng Synne* are taken from the most recent edition of the text based on Bodley 415, *Handlyng Synne*, ed. Idelle Sullens (Binghampton, New York: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1983) although I have also found the earlier EETS edition useful: *Robert of Brunne's 'Handlyng Synne', A.D. 1303: with those parts of the Anglo-French treatise on which it was founded, William of Waddington's 'Manuel des Pechiez'*, ed. F.J. Furnivall, EETS, os, 119 (London: Richard Clay and Sons, 1901), which predominantly represents the text from British Library, Harley MS. 1701 supplemented by Bodl. 415, and for the *Manuel* uses Harley MSS 273 and 4657. It is from this edition that I have taken my citations from *Manuel des Peches*. I have preferred to employ the readings and line numbers from Bodley 415 because it is the most complete version of the text. Both the editions by Sullens and Furnivall contain several errors, and I have cross-referenced my readings against the manuscripts.

³ For general discussion on *Handlyng Synne* and its author Robert Mannyng of Brunne see Robert Raymo, 'Works of Religious and Philosophical Instruction', in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*, vol. 7, ed. Albert E. Hartung (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1984), pp. 2255-2257.

⁴ For a study which deals mainly with Mannyng's 'original' tales and traces probable sources, see S. A. Sullivan, 'A Study of Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne* and its Relation to Other Instructional Works, in Order to Establish the Place of the Poem in its Genre,' unpublished diss. (University of Cambridge, 1978) pp. 153-87.

living for at least fifteen years, and where, given Gilbertine restrictions on ornate literary composition, his work was undoubtedly an extraordinary undertaking.⁵ From the anecdotal / bibliographical material in this text and in the verse chronicle he finished writing some twenty years after he completed *Handlyng Synne*, we are told that he came from Bourne (probably the village about six miles from Sempringham priory in the Kesteven region of South East Lincolnshire).⁶ He also tells us that he was educated at Cambridge, and might well have been resident at the Gilbertine foundation there, St. Edmund's priory. We also get an idea of when he was writing. Mannyng states at the beginning of *Handlyng Synne* that he began the work in 1303 and internal evidence in the text suggests that it was completed around 1318. His verse chronicle was finished, he tells us, in 1338, in Sixhills Priory, another Lincolnshire Gilbertine house around forty miles north of Sempringham (at a point roughly midway between Lincoln and Grimsby). In comparison with other English vernacular translations and adaptations of pastoral material produced in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, anonymous and only broadly locatable texts like the *Cursor Mundi*, *Northern Homily Cycle* and *South English Legendary*, this relatively clearly articulated sense of provenance is rare. Mannyng's unusual desire to situate his writing will be an issue that I return to below.

The manuscript record of *Handlyng Synne* reveals a relatively poor rate of survival in comparison with the Anglo-Norman text from which it was adapted. *Manuel des Péchés* survives in 27 copies, and provenance evidence suggests that the text was, within a few decades of its composition, disseminated across England.⁷ Matthew

⁵ The Gilbertines were institutionally opposed to ornate literary activity, strictures which extended to even the private letters of the canons; the Rule of St. Gilbert states: "He whom writes letters shall write simply and above all, shall avoid the vanity of profound and swelling words"; translation from Rose Graham, *St. Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertines: A History of the Only English Monastic Order* (London: E. Stock, 1901), p. 61.

⁶ The wording is slightly oblique at this point in the text and an alternative biography to that proposed here and usually accepted by scholarship has been proposed by Andrew W. Taubman, 'New Biographical Notes on Robert Mannyng of Brunne', *Notes and Queries*, 56. 2 (2009), pp. 197-201.

⁷ See C. William Marx, *The Devil's Rights and the Redemption in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), p. 76.

Sullivan has hinted at the possibility of some sort of official promulgation of the text along ecclesiastical conduits:

[T]he speed with which the *Manuel* was circulated, starting from...York, and spreading north to Durham, south all the way to the Isle of Wight, east to Bury, and west perhaps as far as Ludlow, is evidence that medieval official publications...did not necessarily circulate haphazardly.⁸

The idea of the ‘official publication’ of *Manuel des Péchés* is perhaps misleading. The term suggests an organised process of mass production and dissemination through ecclesiastical lines for which there is no convincing evidence. Nevertheless, the text’s wide geographic spread and the quality of productions within the corpus do suggest that the *Manuel* entered reading and dissemination networks that allowed it to be communicated reasonably efficiently. The text was evidently situated within the sorts of social networks (including networks of high ecclesiasts and amongst members of noble and magnate classes) where the potential for recopying and dissemination was maximised.⁹ The text, where provenance information is verifiable, soon ended up in the possession of the professional religious and being owned by private patrons of noble rank.¹⁰ The quality of the surviving manuscript witnesses from the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries means that there is a wealth of material evidence for the early transmission of the text. Mannyng’s English text has a rather feeble material testimony of dissemination by comparison. *Handlyng Synne* is extant in only nine manuscript witnesses in total, and only three of these copies are complete versions of the text, with

⁸ Matthew Sullivan, ‘Readers of the *Manuel des Péchés*’, *Romania*, 113 (1992), pp. 233-42 (pp. 241-2).

⁹ In this the *Manuel* might be compared with *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, another vernacular religious text that has been understood as an ‘official publication’; see Ryan Perry, ‘“Thynk on God, as we doon, men that swynk”: The Cultural Locations of *Meditations on the Supper of Our Lord* and the Middle English Pseudo-Bonaventuran Tradition’, *Speculum*, 86.2 (2011), pp. 419-54 (p. 428 and pp. 448-51).

¹⁰ See Adelaide Bennett, ‘A Book Designed for a Noblewoman: An Illustrated *Manuel des Péchés*’ of the Thirteenth Century’, in *Medieval Book Production: Assessing the Evidence*, ed. Linda Brownrigg (Los Altos, CA.: Anderson Lovelace, 1990), pp. 163-81.

six copies that are either fragments or excerpts. Here is a list of the manuscript witnesses:

Manuscript Pressmark/ complete or excerpt?	Production Location	Production date
Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 415 (complete and followed by <i>Meditations on the Supper of Our Lord</i>)	Ashridge College (Bonshommes canons), Herts.	c. 1400
British Library, MS Harley 1701 (complete and followed by <i>Meditations on the Supper of Our Lord</i> and two other short texts)	Ashridge College (Bonshommes canons), Herts.	ca. 1400
Folger Library, MS V.b.236; pt 1 of the 'Clopton manuscript' (complete and followed by <i>Meditations on the Supper of Our Lord</i> – the original codex contained a further 4 texts) ¹¹	Worcs. (and probably decorated in London)	1403- c. 1425

¹¹ This is the first part of the so-called 'Clopton Manuscript', a large codex now dismembered into three sections, the other two manuscripts being, in order of their original position in the manuscript, Princeton University Library, Taylor MS 10 (*Mandeville's Travels*) and London University MS. S.L. V. 17 (*Piers Plowman, Estorie del Evangelie and Assumption of Our Lady*); for descriptions and suggested dating of the hand-writing contained in these two portions of the Clopton manuscript see George Russell and George Kane, *Piers Plowman: The C Version*, (London: Athlone Press, 1997), pp. 1-2; A. I. Doyle, 'Remarks on Surviving Manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*', in *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature: Essays in Honour of G.H. Russell*, ed. Gregory Kratzmann and J. Simpson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1986), pp. 35-48 (p. 44); A. G. Mitchell, 'A Newly Discovered Manuscript of the C-Text of *Piers Plowman*', *Modern Language Review*, 36 (1941), pp. 243-4; Margaret Canney, ed., *The Sterling Library: A Catalogue of the Printed Books and Literary Manuscripts Collected by Sir Louis Sterling and presented by him to the University of London*, (Cambridge: Privately Printed, 1954), pp. 544-5; M.C. Seymour, 'The English Manuscripts of *Mandeville's Travels*', *Edinburgh Bibliographical Society Transactions IV*, 5 (1966), p. 198; J.W. Bennett, *The Rediscovery of Sir John Mandeville* (New York: M.L.A., 1954), pp. 289-90; N. R. Ker, *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries*, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969-92), vol. I, pp. 376-7; Thorlac Turville-Petre argued that the manuscript was 'probably' made for Sir William Clopton (d. 1419) in 'The Vernon and Clopton Manuscripts' *Studies in the Vernon Manuscript*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: D.S.

Dulwich College, MS XXIV (probably once complete) ¹²	South Lincolnshire / Cambridgeshire/ Norfolk, fenlands border region	c. 1400-25
Yale University, Beinecke Library, MS Osborn a. 2 (fragmentary, but probably once complete MS of <i>Handlyng Synne</i>)	Durham	c. 1435-1455 ¹³
‘Vernon manuscript’, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Poet A.1 (excerpt form Mannyng’s treatment of the sacrament of the altar interpolated into the <i>narraciones</i> in the <i>Northern Homily Cycle</i> for the feast of Corpus Christi) ¹⁴	Lichfield (?) ¹⁵	c. 1390-1410

Brewer, 1990), pp. 29-44 (36); an alternative understanding is suggested in Ryan Perry, ‘The Clopton Manuscript and the Beauchamp Affinity: Patronage and Reception Issues in a West Midlands Reading Community’, *Vernacular Manuscript Books of the English West Midlands from the Conquest to the Sixteenth Century*, eds. Wendy Scase and Rebecca Farnham (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 131-59.

¹² The Dulwich manuscript now contains only 21 leaves retaining only the prologue and the greater majority of the Ten Commandments of *Handlyng Synne*, ending imperfectly on line 2894. Catchwords at the foot of fol. 21v (‘zoure wikkid vowys’) demonstrate that the production would have continued beyond this point; the fact that the scribe has copied the prologue to the work, in which Mannyng outlines the scope of the entire text, (lines 14-26) would suggest that the Dulwich MS was once a complete version of *Handlyng Synne*.

¹³ The dates and site of production have been established through analysis of the watermarks on the manuscript. For published descriptions see Sullens, *Handlyng* xxvii-xxx; W. H. Bond and C. U. Faye, *Supplement to the Census of Manuscripts in the United States and Canada* (New York: Bibliographical Society of America, 1962), p. 97, no.5. For an analysis and partial edition of the Beinecke manuscript see Susan A. Schulz, ‘An Edition of Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s *Handlyng Synne*’, unpublished PhD diss. (New York University, 1973).

¹⁴ For discussion of the political implications of the use of this section of *Handlyng Synne* in the Vernon/ Simeon *Northern Homily Cycle* see Ryan Perry, ‘Editorial Politics in the Vernon Manuscript’, in *The Making of the Vernon Manuscript*, ed. Wendy Scase (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 71-95.

'Simeon MS', British Library, MS Additional 22,283 (excerpt from Mannyng's treatment of the sacrament of the altar interpolated into the <i>narraciones</i> in the <i>Northern Homily Cycle</i> for the feast of Corpus Christi)	Lichfield (?)	c. 1390-1410
Cambridge University Library, MS Ii.4.9 (excerpt; the ten commandments from <i>Handlyng Synne</i> , titled, 'Decem Precepta'; the fifteenth of twenty-four miscellaneous religious texts)	Norfolk	c. 1475
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61 (excerpt; a single tale from <i>Handlyng Synne</i>)	Leicester (?)	1475-1500

Of the nine extant manuscripts of *Handlyng Synne* only three contain complete texts – a very closely related group of manuscripts – Bodley 415, Harley 1701 and Folger MS V.b.236. The first two of these may both have been produced in the first decade of the fifteenth century in the scriptorium of Ashridge College, a house of Bonshomme canons near the Hertfordshire/ Buckinghamshire county border, with the Harley manuscript probably copied from the Bodley text.¹⁶ The production of multiple copies of Mannyng's treatise in this religious house may be related to Ashridge's increased pastoral responsibilities in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, as the house was in the process of appropriating a small empire of local satellite churches at this time.¹⁷ The Folger manuscript was probably made in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, and

¹⁵ For the paleographic evidence for associating the Vernon and Simeon manuscripts with Lichfield, see Simon Horobin, 'The Scribes of the Vernon Manuscript', in *The Making of the Vernon Manuscript*, pp. 27-47.

¹⁶ For the argument that these copies were similarly produced in Ashridge see chapter 3 in Ryan Perry, 'The Cultural Locations of *Handlyng Synne*', unpublished PhD diss. (Queen's University of Belfast, 2005).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 206-7.

holds a very close genetic link with the Bodley and Harley manuscripts. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest the text may have been copied from the exemplar used in the making of the Bodley manuscript.¹⁸ A further two copies, Osborn MS A.2 (made in the Durham area and between 1435 and 1455 according to the evidence of the watermarks in this paper codex) and Dulwich College MS 24 (with dialectal evidence suggesting a provenance somewhere around the South Lincolnshire /Cambridgeshire/ Norfolk fenlands region) are now fragmentary, but probably once housed the entirety of Mannyng's text.

Four other miscellaneous codices contain excerpts of *Handlyng Synne*. Ashmole MS 61, the famous narrow book signed by 'Rate', contains only a single tale, the 'Tale of the Forgiving Knight'.¹⁹ Cambridge MS li.4.9, a Norfolk anthology of Middle English religious literature that appears to have been compiled by a priest includes all of Mannyng's section on the Ten Commandments. A portion of *Handlyng Synne* also found its way into those mammoth compendia of Middle English devotional literature, the Simeon and Vernon manuscripts, which preserve a subsection from the seven sacraments dedicated to the sacrament of the altar. And that is it: the entire, rather undistinguished corpus of books containing *Handlyng Synne*.

Several features are striking about this corpus. Excluding Vernon and Simeon there is a general regional concentration in the eastern counties of England (where Gilbertine houses are also exclusively located). It is also the case that there is not a single book that was made remotely near the period in which Robert Mannyng completed his text. To put it into perspective – if we think of the dissemination history of *Handlyng Synne* as being concentrated in the span of 157 years between 1318 and 1475, then there are no material witnesses to the existence of the text from the first half of this period. We have no early, Gilbertine produced manuscripts from which we may get a better sense of how the text may have initially been used, and who the text's first consumers may have been.

To gain some sense of possible utilities for the text in the period, and particularly in the earliest phase of its dissemination, we are reliant on how Mannyng imagines his

¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 133-6.

¹⁹ *Handlyng Synne*, ll. 3799-912; the tale is item 18 in the manuscript, and occurs on fols 26v-27v.

text in action, how the author, in effect, projects a sense of how it will function among the reading communities with which he associates his text. Delineating Mannyng's intended and implied audiences will act as a platform from which one might understand the 'actual' audiences for the extant manuscripts of the text, and thus, perhaps to gauge the extent of the disparity between actual and imagined audiences.²⁰

It is unfortunate that not only do we lack an early Gilbertine *Handlyng Synne* but we also lack meaningful insight into any other books the order's houses may have possessed.²¹ We absolutely lack, for example, the sort of library catalogues and inventories which have provided insight into the libraries of other monastic orders. There are a few oblique references to Gilbertine owned books in the lists made c.1533 by John Leyland, the antiquary of Henry VIII, and in the lists compiled several years earlier in British Library, MS Royal App. 69, but they contain no useful descriptive information on the few manuscripts they recorded at Gilbertine institutions. *Handlyng Synne* was not amongst those works that the lists documented. This, however, is far from surprising given the scope and purpose of Henry VIII's surveys. The fact that, '[h]e was especially interested in theological, historical and legal works by English authors (especially rare works by lesser known English authors)' might lead us to think that Mannyng's work, in particular his *Chronicle* which recounts the history of the kings of England, might have surfaced in the survey, but once we consider that the purpose of the lists was to provide works which would provide authoritative support for Henry VIII's divorce, it becomes clear that Mannyng's works would have been manifestly unsuited to this function.²² Nevertheless, even if *Handlyng Synne* had matched the ideological manifesto behind these surveys and even if catalogues of the Gilbertine libraries survived, it is a tacit possibility that there would still be no recording of a Gilbertine manuscript of *Handlyng*

²⁰ The theoretical implications of the terms 'implied', 'intended' and 'actual' audiences are discussed by Strohm, 'Chaucer's Audience(s): Fictional, Implied, Intended, Actual,' *Chaucer Review* 18 (1983), pp. 137-45.

²¹ For discussion of the service books the Gilbertines habitually reproduced see Graham, p. 61.

²² David N. Bell, *The Libraries of the Cistercians, Gilbertines and Premonstratensians* (London: British Library, 1992), xxviii; Leyland's lists are also reproduced in J. R. Liddell, 'Leyland's Lists of Manuscripts in Lincolnshire Monasteries', *EHR* 54 (1939), pp. 88-95.

Synne. A typical oversight of monastic catalogues, and most probably of the surveys of Henry VIII, is that such an appraisal would often ‘confine itself only to the Abbey book-room and ignore all the various liturgical materials and service books which were to be found elsewhere (in the church for example.)’²³ According to the mode of transmission and imagined audience implied by Mannyng’s text it is possible that a Gilbertine manuscript of *Handlyng Synne* would not have resided in the rarified setting of the monastic library but in locations of its active transmission, locations beyond the confines of the monastic building.

Imagining Textual Transmission

Lacking any manuscripts to reconstruct the early Gilbertine audiences of *Handlyng Synne* it will be necessary to look at the terms in which Mannyng situated his text, or, one could say, the manner in which he imagined his text would reach and be understood by the audiences he targeted. Naturally, the idea of an author delineating an audience within the imaginative setting of a book raises certain problems. Walter Ong has demonstrated the manner in which writers must necessarily fictionalise their audiences, indicating the different protocols which bridge the gulf between writer and audience in a way that is not necessary between an orator and audience:

Context for the spoken word is simply present, centred in on the person speaking and the one or ones to whom he addresses himself and to whom he is related existentially in terms of circumambient actuality... writing comes provided with no such circumambient actuality[.]²⁴

Because of this temporal and spatial fissure between writer and audience Ong argues that readers adopt ‘roles’, indeed, are obliged to adopt ‘roles’ to access written material. The case with *Handlyng Synne* is complicated because the work is written in a style which often reads like a direct address by the author and as if the work is designed to be

²³ Bell, xxvii.

²⁴ Walter J. Ong, ‘The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction,’ *PMLA* 90 (1975), 9-21 (p. 10).

accessed aurally. The work is replete with direct addresses and reprovals which make this piece of writing, paradoxically, read like oration. Nevertheless, because *Handlyng Synne* was clearly originally written by Mannyng and not orated he was still required to fictionalise the audience of his work, and provide an imaginative register by which they might access it, whether as hearers or readers. As Hans Robert Jauss has stated, cultural productions necessarily operate on a 'preconstituted horizon of expectations...to orient the reader's (public's) understanding and to enable a qualifying reception.'²⁵

Mannyng immediately locates his work against the entertaining but idle stories which enthrall his audience, 'Yn gamys, yn festys & at þe ale /Loue men to lestene tröteuale', (47-48) and offers to substitute the corrupting influence of 'tröteuale' (idle tales or foolish talk) with his own morally instructive tales.²⁶ Indeed, the Gilbertine introduces many of his tales with generic markers such as 'borde', 'spelle' and 'geste', expressions more typically associated with secular storytelling than with religious exempla.²⁷ In some respects Mannyng thus situates his text as a form of counter-genre, both a reaction to, yet emulation of the idle stories which gripped the imagination of his envisaged audience. The imaginative precedent by which Mannyng orientates his audience, however, was not, I believe, confined to the morally ambiguous exemplar of those 'talys and rymys [folk] wyl bleþly here,' (46) but also relies upon the success of a positive, recently arrived cultural phenomenon, that is, the vernacular sermons of the friars. A Franciscan house was founded in Grantham only thirteen years before Mannyng began his work, and passages in *Handlyng Synne* appear to assume a familiarity with the preaching of the mendicants that Mannyng shares with his audience.²⁸ Indeed, in one of Mannyng's many digressions from his source text, he authorises his tale by relating it to a

²⁵ Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p. 79.

²⁶ See the online *Middle English Dictionary*, 'trotevāle' <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED47220>> [accessed 1 July 2015].

²⁷ For discussion of the implications of such generic terminology with respect to secular texts see Paul Strohm, 'Storie, Spelle, Geste, Romaunce, Tragedie: Generic Distinctions in the Middle English Troy Narratives,' *Speculum*, 46 (1971), pp. 348-59.

²⁸ The Franciscan house in Grantham, no more than ten miles from Sempringham, was founded c. 1290; see David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses: England and Wales* (London: Longmans, 1971), p. 191.

Franciscan informant, ‘Y shal yow teche, as y herde telle / Ones a frere menor spelle’ (9597-8). As mentioned above, when one reads *Handlyng Synne*, one of the most instantly conspicuous aspects of the style in which Mannyng adapted his source, is that the Middle English text reads almost like a transcription of an oral performance. One early scholar commented that *Handlyng Synne* ‘has the striking phraseology, the clearness, vividness, and directness of the successful spoken sermon.’²⁹

Mannyng’s ‘horizon of expectation’ thus appears to be based not on literary precedents, but on oral traditions of storytelling and homily, which were previously accessible to a wide variety of audiences. Mannyng’s work implies its transmission to groups of listeners and one can imagine churches and other places of public gathering such as local marketplaces as possible sites for Gilbertine promulgation of the text. Because each significant Gilbertine institution had varying degrees of interest in more than one church, and social gatherings other than the strictly religious would have been likely scenes of oral dissemination, it is entirely possible that a single manuscript could be moved between locations, perhaps serving many reading (or hearing) communities. Amongst Mannyng’s addressees in the prologue to the poem he hails the ‘gode men of brunne’, (58) the village near Sempringham, and presumably that of the author’s birth.³⁰ A.I. Doyle has asserted the possibility that Mannyng sent ‘a copy to the parish priest or the Augustinian house there, as a measure of publication.’³¹ Equally likely is the possibility that he envisaged ‘reciting it personally’, or indeed, that another agent of the Gilbertines would recite it there.³² Joyce Coleman has argued that Mannyng may have been Sempringham priory’s *hostillarius*, the canon responsible for the pilgrim guest house, and that the text was produced to entertain and instruct pilgrims visiting

²⁹ Hazel E. Fosgate, ‘Studies in Robert Mannyng’s *Handlyng Synne* with an Edition of His Thirteen Original Stories’, unpublished M.A. diss. (Mount Holyoke College, 1914), p. 18.

³⁰ J. A.W. Bennett has suggested an alternative birthplace for Mannyng, in Yorkshire. This seems very unlikely given the clear regional affinity that is developed in *Handlyng Synne* with the fen-edge areas below the river Witham in Lincolnshire; see J.A.W. Bennett, *Middle English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) n. 478.

³¹ A. I. Doyle, ‘A Survey of the Origins and Circulation of Theological Writings in English in the 14th, 15th and Early 16th Centuries with Special Consideration of the Part of the Clergy Therein’, unpublished PhD diss. (University of Cambridge, 1953), p. 60.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Sempringham to venerate the shrine of Saint Gilbert, and whilst this seems a plausible site for the performance of Mannyng's text, there are reasons, as this essay will go on to consider, to think that Mannyng believed his text would move further afield.³³

Mannyng's addresses to audiences within the text signal that the author imagined his work would circulate beyond the confines of Sempringham priory or other Gilbertine houses.³⁴

The text also reveals means of transmission other than its oral recital. Although an affected posture of a homiletic, oral performance runs through the work, Mannyng's prologue appears to imagine more private perusals of his text. The lines, 'On þys manere handyl þy dedes/ And *lestene* & lerne wan any hem *redys*', (117-8) suggests a conflation of modes of transmission, with listening and reading both potential methods of accessing the text. Indeed, within a few lines Mannyng more definitely articulates the possibility of private access to the text whilst still reiterating the potential for the work's oral transmission:

Whedyr outwys þou wylt opone þe boke,
 Pou shalt fynde begynng on to loke.
 Oueral ys begynnyng- oueral ys ende,
 Hou þat þou wylt turne hyt or wende.
 Many þynges þer yn mayst þou here;
 Wyþ ofte *redyng* mayst þou lere.
 Pou mayst nout wyþ onys *redyng*
 knowe þe soþe of euery þyng (121-128).

Mannyng's imaginative creation of readers of his work alongside listeners suggests that he believed the work would be accessed in differing ways. His ideal reader will return to the work to reappraise the common origins of sin - 'þou darst neuere recche whar þou

³³ Joyce Coleman, 'Handling Pilgrims: Robert Mannyng and the Gilbertine Cult', *Philological Quarterly* 81 (2002), pp. 311–26.

³⁴ *Contra* the now outmoded view expressed by Derek Pearsall that *Handlyng Synne* was composed for explicit use in Sempringham, to be read to 'lay brothers and novitiate canons at the Priory,' in *Old and Middle English Poetry* (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p.108.

begynne/ For euery whare ys begynnyng of synne' (119-120). Unless Mannyng or another Gilbertine reader is to read and re-read sections appropriate to the 'begynnyngs' the listener needed to attend to, the possibility is implied that the work could be owned or at least held for substantial periods of time by private audiences. We may note the pun, 'Hou þat þyou wylt turne hyt or wende', containing the double meanings of his audience both turning the pages of his book to find sin's 'begynnyng', and also stating his work will inform them how to reverse ('turne') such 'begynnyngs' in their own lives. If one were to appraise Mannyng's audience, the 'lewed men', for whom he says he writes, as being an entirely illiterate demographic, one might attribute Mannyng's references to the acts of reading and re-reading down to trope.³⁵ The Gilbertine and his fellow canons would have understood a book as something approached (and re-approached) as a reader, and Mannyng's construction of an audience may have been programmed according to the imaginative register of a member of a culture that defined itself through its very literateness.³⁶

Handlyng Synne, however, is far from being the only Middle English text which conflates the acts of reading and listening. Gower's lines in *Confessio Amantis*, 'whan I of here loves rede / Min Ere with the tale I fede', or Chaucer's apology in the prologue to *The Miller's Tale*, 'who so list it noght yhere / Turne ouer the leef, and chese another tale', are examples which similarly (to someone with modern notions of reading) appear to confuse listening to text and absorbing it with the eye.³⁷ Such confluences demonstrate that reading was understood as an act, whether in settings like a household, or in arenas such as a church, which normally involved more than one person.³⁸ Reading the text

³⁵ For a general appraisal of the semantic evolution of the term 'lewed' see Peggy A. Knapp, *Time-Bound Words: Semantic and Social Economies from Chaucer's England to Shakespeare's* (Basingstoke; London: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp. 98-107. Also see *MED*, s.v. *leued*, where the meaning can vary from 'ignorant' to 'non-clerical'.

³⁶ For the idea that monastic society defined itself according to literateness and correspondingly that the laity were characterised by monastic writers according to their illiterateness see Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, esp. 'Insurgent Literacy', pp. 13-66.

³⁷ For discussion of this phenomenon with reference to Mannyng see Ruth Crosby, 'Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages,' *Speculum* 11 (1936), pp. 88-110.

³⁸ For an essay which discusses reading activity within such settings see Ryan Perry and Lawrence Tuck, "[W]heþyr þu redist er herist redyng, I wil be plesyd wyth þe": Margery Kempe and Locations for Middle English Devotional Reading and Hearing', in *Spaces*

aloud to an assemblage, perhaps to family or friends, or indeed to a congregation was a cultural norm (though not a cultural absolute) and for most of society, private, internal reading was atypical. It is certainly also possible that later-medieval conceptions of reading and listening were so utterly melded, that even a solitary reader might regard themselves as listening (via the internal soliloquy) to the text at which they gazed.³⁹ Ultimately, I concur with the emphasis Joyce Coleman has placed on the potential for textual ‘bimodality’, where texts might be accessed both through private or public reading.⁴⁰ However, in the terms of my own discussion, Coleman’s dichotomising of acts of internal and public reading is not the central issue. My argument requires a different dichotomy. In terms of the production history of *Handlyng Synne*, or indeed any devotional text emanating from within a religious institution, dissemination almost certainly will involve the leaking of the text into contexts beyond the religious order –, when the text becomes owned, copied or transmitted by audiences other than the original, institutional progenitors of the text. That the potential for the ownership of *Handlyng Synne* in secular settings is tacitly recognised by Mannyng is made apparent through comparison with the *Northern Homily Cycle* (hereafter *NHC*), a text with which *Handlyng Synne* is often bracketed as a contemporary product of a national pastoral initiative in the years following Pecham’s Lambeth decree of 1281 (in which the archbishop of Canterbury imposed a syllabus for the instruction of the laity in the basic tenets of Christian belief). The *NHC* sets out within the prologue a particular mode and setting for the transmission of the text in a manner that is completely lacking in *Handlyng Synne*:

For namlic on the Sunenday
Comes the lawed men thair bede to say
To the kirc, an for to lere

for Reading in Later Medieval England, ed. by Mary C. Flannery and Carrie Griffin (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 132-48.

³⁹ For a thorough discussion of medieval modes of textual transmission, particularly the prevalence of ‘public reading’ over private reading, see Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

Gastlic lare that thar thai here...
 For [thi] wil Ic on Inglis schau,
 And ger our laued brether knawe,
 Quat alle tha godspelles saies
 That falles tille the Sunnendayes[.] (99-112)⁴¹

Whereas *Handlyng Synne* is situated against the idle tales of his audience's leisure time, the *NHC* is located within the Church service, the primary locus for lay spiritual instruction. The *NHC* is constructed to match the liturgical cycle of the Church service and this is the prescribed setting for the work's transmission – explaining the Latin 'godspelles' within the service to the 'laued' listeners. This text was written with no authorial regard for privatisation by its lay audience, but only to mediate between the 'Clerk wit lar of Godes worde' (39) and his non-Latinate Sabbath and holy-day congregations. That *Handlyng Synne* was not specifically written to function as part of the religious service is indicated not only by the author's allusions to his audience's recreational activities, 'yn gamys, yn festys & at þe ale', (46) occasions on which the text will provide instructive entertainment, or by Mannyng's reference to his audience re-approaching the text. The fact that the author carefully provides biographical and anecdotal material in both *Handlyng Synne* and the *Chronicle*, beacons for the texts' provenance that are so rare in literature of the period, may indicate the author's belief that his works would be accessed in arenas other than the strictly religious or in settings beyond direct Gilbertine influence. Mannyng's biographical and institutional markers might be viewed as a means of promulgating the spiritual achievements of the Gilbertines, without necessitating the active transmission of the text by agents of the order, or for that matter, within settings of Gilbertine control.⁴² Mannyng may have believed that clerical readers, such as chaplains and reading priests (or 'listers' to use the

⁴¹ Here cited from *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. J. Wogan-Browne *et al.* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1999), p. 128.

⁴² For a contradictory view, where it is suggested that *Handlyng Synne* was intended for explicit use from the pulpit, see Sullivan, 'Study' 68-96.

Middle English designation), would perform the text in settings outside of the church, and beyond typical pastoral obligations such as preaching.⁴³

Imagining Mannyng's 'Lewed' Folk

What is absolutely certain is that Mannyng imagines his text would be both read and heard. Mannyng, despite his imaginative (and possibly sometimes active) role as orator of the text, was not the only performer of *Handlyng Synne*— he was not an exclusive promulgator, reading his work aloud to communities in the environs of Sempringham priory. The text acknowledges that ‘clerkys’ would read the work, and Mannyng on occasion manifests defensiveness against their potential approbation, such as when he asserts that he will not reveal to his lay audience any details about certain varieties of sexual sin (presumably because discussion of these ‘pryutees’ might give them ideas):

þe pryutees wyle y nouzt name,
 For noun þerefore shuld me blame...
 Of þys clerkys wyle y nouzt seye;
 To greue hem y haue grete eye,
 For þey wote þat ys to wetyn
 And se hyt weyl before hem wretyn (31-40).

Interestingly these lines suggest he is addressing priestly readers/ hearers at this point, or at least, he is thinking of clerks qualified to administer the sacrament of confession. These clerks, ‘wote þat ys to wetyn’ – they *know what there is to know* about such sins because they ‘se hyt weyl before hem wretyn’, they can access writing about these sins – presumably in confessors’ manuals. Concluding the section on the ‘Sacrament of the

⁴³ For a discussion of ‘reading priests’, see Ryan Perry and Lawrence Tuck, “[W]heþyr þu redist er herist redyng, I wil be plesyd wyth þe”: Locations for Middle English Devotional Reading and Hearing’, in *Spaces for Reading in Late Medieval England*, eds Carrie Griffin and Mary Flannery (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 133-148; for the OED definition of ‘lister’ see “† lister, n.1”, OED Online, June 2016, Oxford University Press <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/109013>> (accessed July 28, 2016).

Altar', Mannyng addresses both readers and listeners and appears to differentiate actively between those 'clerkys' who might access the text directly, and the 'lewed', whom he tells us are the primary audience for his work. After telling the tale of a wife who feeds her trapped husband through spiritual gifts, Mannyng imagines settings of his work's transmission:

Ne no clerk þat þys ryme redes
 Shal fynd a womman of so kynd dedes.
 Ze men þat are now yn present
 Þat haue herd me rede þys sacrament,
 How ouer al þyng haþ powere,
 Þe sacrament of þe autere,
 As y haue here to zow shewed,
 Nat to lered onely but eke to lewed.
 Þe lewed men, y telle hyt yow,
 Þese clerkes kunne hyt weyl ynow (10805-10814).

Again Mannyng strikingly fictionalises his work in performance, imagining himself addressing and reading to an assemblage of 'lewed' and 'lered' listeners, even as he paradoxically admits a clerical *lector* for his work – the 'clerk þat þys ryme redes'. Mannyng perhaps reveals something of the dynamics of medieval reading practice, where the clerical agent reading a text to a gathering of listeners might, in effect, perform the role, indeed, become the embodiment of the author. The clerical reader might not only read Mannyng's words, but affect his voice, to be Robert Mannyng as he reads, bringing his distinctive didacticism and personal asides to life. Such an understanding of voicing by those performing texts to groups of readers makes sense of articulations in *Handlyng Synne* that otherwise appear confusing and contradictory.

There is no precise definition of the social make-up of the 'lewed' in *Handlyng Synne*, but a definition of the author's understanding of the term is suggested in the prologue to Mannyng's *Chronicle*.⁴⁴ He states that he writes:

⁴⁴ For discussion and bibliographic references to Mannyng's *Chronicle*, see Edward Donald Kennedy, 'Chronicles and other Historical Writing,' *A Manual of the Writings in*

Not for þe lewid bot for þe lewed
 For þo þat in þis land wone
 Pat þe Latyn ne Frankys cone (6-8).

Mannyng here indicates that his audience for the *Chronicle* will be analogous to the ‘lewed’ audience he addressed in *Handlyng Synne*. ‘Lewed’, in this case appears simply to equate to non-competency in Latin or French, an interpretation which for Turville-Petre implies a more precise social classification. In both ‘Politics and Poetry’ and *England the Nation* Turville-Petre has constructed a portrait of Mannyng as a highly polemical writer, championing the cause of the ‘unfree’ English, and chafing against the repression of their Anglo-Norman overlords.⁴⁵ Turville-Petre argues that Mannyng ‘sees the lords as Norman and the ‘lewed’ as English.’⁴⁶ To judge that English monolingualism, even in the first half of the fourteenth century, indicated low social rank, however, is to greatly over-simplify the dynamics of later medieval linguistics. Textual evidence indicates that neither the entirety of those of higher social status were competently francophone, nor those of lower rank utterly monolingual. Simplistic equations on medieval linguistics are confounded by diverse and contradictory assertions by writers, ranging from a twelfth-century monastic claim that ‘Que en Franceis le poent

Middle English, 1050-1500, vol. 8 ed. Albert E. Hartung, (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1989), pp. 2625-2628 (pp. 2811-8); for an edition (from which all the following quotations are excerpted) see Frederick J. Furnivall ed., *The Story of England by Robert Mannyng of Brunne, A.D. 1338*, Rolls Series 87, 2 vols (London: H.M.S.O., 1887).

⁴⁵ See Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature and National Identity, 1290-1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 18; as Joyce Coleman points out, this politicised view of Mannyng has become something of a ‘neo-fact’, impacting for example on the contextualising of Mannyng’s *Chronicle* in the *Idea of the Vernacular* (see below); see Joyce Coleman, ‘Strange Rhyme: Prosody and Nationhood in Robert Mannyng’s *Story of England*,’ *Speculum* 78 (2003), pp. 1214-38 (p. 1215); Nicholas Watson, ‘The Politics of Middle English Writing’, *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. J. Wogan-Browne et al (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1999) p. 334. For another study which challenges Turville-Petre’s assertions see Douglas Moffat, ‘Sin, Conquest, Servitude: English Self-Image in the Chronicles of the Early Fourteenth Century’, *The Work of Work: Servitude, Slavery and Labor in Medieval England*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen and Douglas Moffat (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1994), pp. 146-68.

⁴⁶ Turville-Petre, *England*, p. 18.

entendre / E li grant and li mendre' (both the great and the least can understand it in French), to the assessment contained in the Auchinleck manuscript that 'Many noble ich have useiye/ that no Frenynsche couthe seye'.⁴⁷ Froissart indicates that as early as 1329, many of the eminent members of Edward III's court who visited France 'did not know French well enough to complete the act of homage in due form.'⁴⁸ As Carol Meale writes, 'the assumption that linguistic difference can be simply equated with social difference [...] can no longer be sustained without qualification.'⁴⁹

Scholarship such as John Thompson's studies of the *Cursor Mundi*, a text approximately contemporary with *Handlyng Synne*, further suggests the problematic nature in delineating the social status of imagined audiences of Middle English texts.⁵⁰ Thompson has shown that whilst the 'Cursor-poet' states his intention to write for 'the commun at understand', in particular those who 'na frankis can', the poet simultaneously alludes to the literary vogues of a polyglot audience in creating a context for the work's reception. This English vernacular work is thus indicative of the fact that literary vernacular English was increasingly a cultural option even amongst those who were capable of accessing material in Latin or French, and Thompson has related the *Cursor-poet's* audience to those of manuscripts such as 'the early trilingual collection', British Library MS Harley 2253.⁵¹ One could alternatively argue that the literary tastes of

⁴⁷ In the text *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, quotation drawn from Douglas A. Kibbee, *For to speke Frenche Trewely: The French Language in England 1000-1600: Its Status, Description and Instruction* (Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publishing Co., 1991), p. 39. For another useful discussion of Medieval linguistics see Ian Short, 'On Bilingualism in Anglo-Norman England,' *Romance Philology* 33 (1980), pp. 467-79.

⁴⁸ Kibbee, p. 35.

⁴⁹ See Carol Meale, "'Gode men / Wiues maydnes and alle men": Romance and its Audiences', *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994) pp. 209-225, (pp. 210-11).

⁵⁰ For Thompson's insights into the cultural implications of the *Cursor Mundi* see his 'The *Cursor Mundi*, the "Inglis Tong", and Romance', *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994), pp. 99-120; 'The Governance of the English Tongue,' *Individuality and Achievement in Middle English Poetry*, ed. O.S. Pickering (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), pp.19-37; and his introduction to *The 'Cursor Mundi': Poem, Texts and Contexts*, *Medium Ævum Monographs*, new ser. 19 (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Language and Literature, 1998).

⁵¹ Thompson, 'The *Cursor Mundi*, the "Inglis Tong", and Romance', p. 103.

francophone society were filtering both aurally and literately into the cultural repertoire of the non-French speaking public. Akin to the *Cursor Mundi*, Mannyng's *Chronicle* refers to romance, a genre typically associated in the early fourteenth century with polyglot audiences. However, Mannyng does so in the context of the discussion of rhymes in 'Inglis,' revealing that the romances of Anglo-Norman and French origin were circulating in the English vernacular.⁵² Mannyng laments that such tales have not been scrupulously retold, including (evidently) his own favourite, the tale of Sir Tristan:

I see in song, in sedgeyng tale
 Of Erceldoun & of Kendale,
 Non þam says as þai þam wroght,
 & in þer saying it semes noght;
 Pat may þou here in Sir Tristrem;
 Ouer gestes it has þe steem,
 Ouer alle it that is or was,
 If men it sayd as made Thomas (93-100).⁵³

Mannyng's words reveal the existence of both polyglot and monolingual audiences for English versions of romances such as Sir Tristan. Mannyng, himself polyglot, and evidently a reader of both French and Latin writings (from which he drew to write *Handlyng Synne* and the *Chronicle*) reveals in this passage his own appetite for English romance verse.⁵⁴ It would thus be wrong to apply a precise demographic to the audiences for the tales of the 'disours', 'seggers' and 'harpours' (minstrels, professional oral narrators and harpists) that Mannyng refers to in the *Chronicle*.⁵⁵ As he did in the prologue to *Handlyng Synne*, Mannyng addresses an audience disposed to hearing tales (presumably in English) in their leisure time, people who 'beyn of swyche manere/ þat

⁵² Mannyng's discussion of 'strange Inglis' will be more fully explored below.

⁵³ For a fascinating discussion of what she terms the 'prosody passage', see Joyce Coleman, 'Strange', pp. 1214-38.

⁵⁴ It is possible that the 'Sir Tristrem' to which Mannyng alludes may be analogous to the version of the poem found in the Auchinlech manuscript; see Coleman, 'Strange' 1219-20.

⁵⁵ These terms for professional entertainers are found in the *Chronicle*, 37-8.

talys & rymys wyle bleply here', (*Handlyng Synne* 45-6) whilst simultaneously deriding the ability and morality of the purveyors of such material.⁵⁶

The substance of *Handlyng Synne*, although ostensibly directed at a socially universal audience, appears most pertinent to those members of society with some degree of disposable income, ranging from south-Lincolnshire's emergent proto-gentry to established knightly families.⁵⁷ Certainly, in the case of the *Chronicle*, it is difficult to support Turville-Petre's notion that Mannyng wrote solely with a peasant audience in mind. Joyce Coleman has articulated the most likely audience which Mannyng imagined the *Chronicle* work would reach:

Unlike the peasantry, the gentry would have the means to reward the Gilbertine Order for providing the text; the clerks or other literate household members capable of reading (and explicating) it to them; and the leisure time to take in thousands of lines.⁵⁸

Coleman further argues that Mannyng, akin to other translators of historical literature such as Gaimar, may have acquired his source texts through wealthy patrons, 'many of which were unlikely to have been available at Sempringham or Sixhills (the two priories with which Mannyng is associated.)'⁵⁹ Of course, Coleman might be said to be guilty of overlooking the considerable fluidity of economic standing within demographic designations, and I have previously argued that I agree with Turville-Petre that 'rich peasants' ('Politics' 18), a caste that might be understood as a kind of proto-gentry, were included in Mannyng's imagined audience for *Handlyng Synne*.⁶⁰ However, given that *Handlyng Synne* is clearly involved in promoting the advantages of purchasing prayers and other spiritual commodities from Sempringham it also seems likely that members of

⁵⁶ See Coleman, 'Strange', p. 1218.

⁵⁷ See Perry, 'The Cultural Locations', chapter 1.

⁵⁸ Coleman, 'Strange', p. 1225

⁵⁹ Coleman, 'Strange', p. 1225.

⁶⁰ Thorlac Turville-Petre, 'Politics and Poetry in the Early Fourteenth Century', *Review of English Studies* 39 (1988), pp. 1-28 (at p. 18).

the more established gentry, time-honoured benefactors of the Gilbertines, would have been among the audiences targeted by the author.⁶¹

Interestingly, Mannyng addresses his audience as ‘lordes lewed’ in his prologue to the *Chronicle*, although such an articulation cannot be understood to be the definition of a social demographic in this case, but a troped polite address. Nevertheless, the fact that the words might be used together without a hint of ironic pretension is indicative that the terms did not necessarily refer to mutually exclusive social groupings. Undoubtedly, throughout *Handlyng Synne*, Mannyng appears to speak directly to the upper tier of manorial society:

3e lordynges þat haue ynow,
 Þys tale haue y told for 3ow,
 Þat 3e ne repente 3ow of larges,
 Þat 3e 3yue to 3our almes (7069-72).

Mannyng’s mention of ‘larges’ makes it apparent that he is not here invoking a polite address topos to an imagined peasant audience. Largesse, described by Heal as ‘that quality of magnanimity that the Aristotelian tradition placed at the heart of the true aristocracy’ was a culturally specific characteristic associated with the nobility, and would certainly have been an entirely inappropriate term to apply to even the wealthiest peasant.⁶² Mannyng also frequently adopts a similarly direct form of address for other prominent social types within the manorial system, such as his lecture to officers of manorial courts:

Parfore 3e stywardes on benche,
 Þer on shulde 3e all þenche.
 3yf þou of þe pore haue pyte,
 Þan wyle god haue mercy on þe. (5439-42)

⁶¹ See Perry, ‘The Cultural Locations’, chapter 1.

⁶² Felicity Heal, ‘Reciprocity and Exchange in the Late Medieval Household’, *Medieval Cultures* 9 (1993), pp. 179-98 (quotation at p. 180).

As Sullivan has written, the ‘point of such interjections is lost unless the subjects are likely to be found among the audience.’⁶³ Certainly, Mannyng indicates in the text that ‘lewed’ might simply equate to ‘lay’. Warning his audience against standing in the chancel during the service, the author makes it clear that an eminent man might also be tagged ‘lewed’:

Be lewed man holy cherche wyl forbede
 To stonde yn þe chaunsel wyl men rede.
 Who so eure þar to ys customer,
 Þogh he be of gret power,
 Boþe he synneþ & doþ greuaunce
 Azens þe clergye ordynaunce. (8807-8812)⁶⁴

The racial division of the ‘lewed’ and the ‘Norman’, ultimately, makes less sense than a classification where ‘lewed’ equates to a socially and economically diverse laity.

Imagining Scenes of Transmission

Referring to Mannyng’s statement in the prologue of *Handlyng Synne*, that men love to hear stories ‘[y]n gamys, yn festys & at þe ale’, Turville-Petre has declared that Mannyng attempts ‘to draw his listeners away from the frivolity of tavern-tales.’⁶⁵ Turville-Petre here engages in a subtle demographic categorisation of Mannyng’s imagined audience, hinting that the author competes with ‘seggers’ who perform in village taverns, and hence amongst a predominantly peasant clientele. Perhaps a more likely cultural space in which Mannyng imagined his stories would vie against those of secular storytellers for the attention of his audience was in the manorial halls of the

⁶³ S.A. Sullivan, ‘A Study of Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s *Handlyng Synne* and its Relation to Other Instructional Works, in Order to Establish the Place of the Poem in its Genre’, unpublished PhD diss. (University of Cambridge, 1978) p. 69.

⁶⁴ The opening lines of this section of the *Manuel* read, ‘Lay ne deit demorer / Ouek les clers en le qeor’ (6787-8).

⁶⁵ Turville-Petre, ‘Politics’, p. 4.

regional lords with whom the Gilbertines had links. In such sites Mannyng's text might approach the diverse strata his didacticism addresses throughout *Handlyng Synne*, ranging from the 'grete lordyngys' (2998) and '[r]yche ladyys', (3230) to their gentry affinity, 'Iustyses, shereues and baylyues', (6795) 'cunseylours', (5409) 'legysters', 'acountours' (5410), 'domes men' (5483) and 'stywardes' (5439), and to the household staff, 'men þat serue knztys & squyers'. (7270)⁶⁶ Indeed, on special feast-days the tenants of a lord might customarily be invited to enter the 'gamys and festys' of the manor hall, particularly at times such as Christmas and at the culmination of the summer harvest. As Heal writes, the '*gestum*, or tenant feast, was the occasion for hospitality given by the lord', a festival at which the gathering could anticipate entertainment such as '[s]ongs and carols'.⁶⁷ We are provided with a flavour of the manorial *gestum* in the *Gawain*-poet's *Cleanness*, in which the author draws on the parable of the Wedding Feast.⁶⁸ Instilling his poem with a sense of lively contemporaneity, the poet depicts an event where the low-born (seated appropriately according to their station) dine, and are treated to the performances of minstrels within the noble *hospicium*:

Wheþer þay wern worþy oþer wers, wel wern þay stowed,
 Ay þe best byfore and bryztest atyred,
 Þe derrest at þe hyze dese, þat dubbed wer fayrest,
 And syþen on lenþe biloghe ledez inogh.
 And ay as segges serly semed by her wedez,
 So with marschal at her mete mensked þay were.
 Clene men in compaynye forknowen wern lyte,
 And zet þe symplest in þat sale watz serued to þe fulle,
 Boþe with menske and with mete and mynstrasy noble,

⁶⁶ The line references here presented, naturally, reveal only a sample of the many occasions such socially specific designations are used.

⁶⁷ Heal describes this seigniorial 'duty' being honoured by Dame Alice de Breyene, who entertained three-hundred guests of the local tenantry on New Year's Day at Acton Hall, Suffolk, 1413; see 'Reciprocity and Exchange', p. 183.

⁶⁸ The poet derives the tale from the Vulgate gospels according to Matthew (22: 1-14) and Luke (14: 16-24).

And alle þe laykez þat a lorde aȝt in londe schewe. (113-22)⁶⁹

Such occasions for festivity, amongst varied demographics, may be precisely the cultural settings in which Mannyng imagined his works being performed. Potential households that the text may have reached could include the manor of Irnham, the home of the Luttrell family (and the house for which the spectacular Luttrell Psalter was commissioned); or of the Beaumont family, who had both been patrons of the Gilbertines (indeed, the Luttrells sent female members of the family into Gilbertine nunneries).⁷⁰ Turville-Petre has dismissed the possibility that Mannyng's *Chronicle* might have been intended for an audience of such standing, stating 'the powerful and the educated already had their histories, such as Langtoft, in French.'⁷¹ The French-born Henry Beaumont (c. 1280-1340) Turville-Petre argues, 'would not, and probably could not, have read the *Chronicle*'.⁷² Whilst this is almost certainly true, it must be considered that longer established seigniorial houses may not have been as competently francophone as the Beaumonts, and that Henry would necessarily have staffed his household with English speakers and formed a gentry network of affiliates, who may not have been able to access complex literature in languages other than their native vernacular. It certainly seems plausible that even the Beaumont household might have embraced cultural amusements in English, particularly if we consider that in the context of increasing tensions between

⁶⁹ For the edition cited here see Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, ed., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 3rd ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996.)

⁷⁰ The daughter of Geoffrey Luttrell was a nun at Sempringham; see Michael Camille, *Mirror in Parchment: The Luttrell Psalter and the Making of Medieval England* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), p. 95; Turville-Petre, 'Politics', p. 21. Turville-Petre focuses on a notable altercation between Geoffrey Luttrell and the Gilbertines; however, there is no doubt that the family were important benefactors to the order. His great uncle, Robert Luttrell (not Geoffrey's brother as suggested by Turville-Petre) for instance, alienated his manor of Stamford in 1292 so that it might act as a college for the Gilbertines. See Turville-Petre, 'Politics' pp. 21-2; Graham, *Gilbert*, p. 45. For an accurate family tree of the Luttrells see Camille, p. 94. For Beaumont patronage of the Gilbertines see Turville-Petre, 'Politics', pp. 11-12; Graham, *Gilbert*, pp. 94-5.

⁷¹ Turville-Petre, 'Politics', p. 13.

⁷² *Ibid.*; see also Maddicott, J. R.. 'Beaumont, Sir Henry de (c.1280–1340)', J. R. Maddicott in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., edited by Lawrence Goldman, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37169>> (accessed January 5, 2016).

England and France in the period, a recently arrived outsider might be particularly anxious not to alienate himself from the surrounding community. Additionally, it could be argued that members of such seigniorial families had good reason to invest in an English work which ‘emphasized the just claims of the English Crown to Scotland’, in a period in which regional lords needed both to staff their military retinues, and burden the local tenants and gentry with war taxes.⁷³ French Histories, such as that by Langtoft, would ultimately be of little use to propagandise the necessity for the protracted war against the Scots amongst the greater majority of the local populace who suffered the bane of its economic impact. The *Chronicle* might thus not have been written to be read by French speakers such as Beaumont, but plausibly may have still been procured by men in his position who could utilise the more universal appeal of English verse as a political tool. Interestingly, Turville-Petre’s argument that the *Chronicle* contains ‘polemic...which would not have appealed [to the seigniorial class]’, has been tempered by subsequent studies of the work. Douglas Moffat argues that rather than radicalising racial issues, ‘Mannyng seems to point the way...to a possible integration of the “English” and “French”.’⁷⁴ If it is true that Mannyng held the ‘Norman party line’ on the issue of the conquest that Turville-Petre holds as being contentious, then it is possible that noblemen such as Luttrell and Beaumont may have actively encouraged the recital of Mannyng’s *Chronicle* at both festal and more intimate gatherings.⁷⁵ Most importantly, local lords, along with their gentry affiliates, were more likely to be in an economic position to obtain copies of Mannyng’s texts, in the manner suggested by the author’s implication (that the text would be repeatedly re-approached by its audience) in the prologue to *Handlyng Synne*. Through such privately owned copies of Mannyng’s text, *Handlyng Synne* could have been publicised throughout the various strata of a regional community, amongst the adherents and tenants of a regional lord. The work would not need Mannyng, or a Gilbertine reader of the text, but could be read by household clerics

⁷³ Ibid., p.12.

⁷⁴ Moffat argues that Mannyng ‘intensifies’ the culpability of Harold in his depiction of the events of the conquest, simultaneously justifying William’s seizure of the Crown and exonerating the English people for the sin of Harold; see Moffat, 159-66 (esp. p. 166).

⁷⁵ Moffat, 165.

to gatherings within the noble household, with these men perhaps voicing *Handlyng Synne* and performing Robert Mannyng.

Therefore, the imagined secular ownership of the text does not contradict Mannyng's dichotomy of 'lewed' listeners and clerical readers. Ultimately, Mannyng's creation of a fictive oral setting for his work defines the relationship envisaged in the text between the writing and the 'lewed'. In creating an illusory oral setting for his work, Mannyng delimits the relationship between his text and his lay audience in a manner that imaginatively necessitates a clerical reader and lay listener. He contextualises his own act of writing, his speaking from the pages, by fictionalising himself as the 'lered' who reads to the 'lewed' whilst tacitly acknowledging that other 'clerkys' will read his work, potentially, like in his fiction, to assembled members of the laity. Furthermore, because he considered his work should be accessed repeatedly by members of his lay audience, he subtly acknowledges the enabling processes of copying and dissemination which might take *Handlyng Synne* into local households. Naturally, such scenes of transmission (of reading, of listening, the work perhaps read aloud by a family member or more appropriately, according to Mannyng's own equation of transmission, by a cleric associated with or employed by a family)⁷⁶ could not have been homes of the lower peasantry. The possibility of such a model for transmission could only be within the houses of those of sufficient standing, who either might afford the making of a copy, had the leisure time and ability to create their own book, or perhaps secure the loan of the text through exertion of their status and affiliations. Indeed, Mannyng's insistence on the 'lewed' nature of his audience might best be understood in political terms. The writer's characterisation of his audience as 'lewed' might be seen as a subtle reminder to those gentry, perhaps locally significant in secular power, of their essential ignorance and fallibility in spiritual matters. By emphasising a universal clerical/'lewed' dicotomy Mannyng asserts a sense of unqualified spiritual authority over his audience, regardless of social rank.

⁷⁶ The model of Margery Kempe, supposedly illiterate, yet familiar with devotional works through private readings by clerics, is a possible prototype for the manner in which audiences of the emergent proto-gentry might have approached (and re-approached) *Handlyng Synne*.

Where are the books?

Of course, there is a problem with the scenario I have set out: where then are the books that testify to Mannyng's projected audience? The books of *Handlyng Synne* produced in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries must, of course, had ancestors – there must have been some now lost books that were produced during Mannyng's lifetime, though how many is now impossible to assess. Idelle Sullen produced a stemma for *Handlyng Synne* that posited at least six missing ancestors to manuscripts within the extant corpus, but admits her posited relationships are 'very problematical'.⁷⁷ Ian Doyle suggested that the relatively poor survival of *Handlyng Synne* might be through what he punningly called 'hard handling' – that is, Mannyng's text circulated widely, but in utility grade books that were destroyed through regular use.

Added to Doyle's assessment of the potentially poor quality of books containing this text is the nature of the communities to which the Gilbertines were connected and the timing of Mannyng's project. Whereas foundations of other orders tended to be 'affiliated to supra-national organisations of one kind or another', the Gilbertines, predominately concentrated in eastern England, tended to have support on a localised level as opposed to having succor from 'the great magnates of the realm'.⁷⁸ As such the benefactions on which Gilbertine foundations were based were not large, and Gilbertine houses did not have the pecuniary safety net which could be supplied by the eminent magnates of England. The early benefactions on which Sempringham and the other Gilbertine houses were formed were drawn from aristocratic families who were of regional rather than national significance.⁷⁹ Indeed, of the forty named donors who were the early benefactors of Sempringham only ten were of baronial class, and of these few were

⁷⁷ Sullens, xxii.

⁷⁸ Brian Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertine Order c.1130-c.1300* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 264.

⁷⁹ See Graham Platts, "'South Lincolnshire at the Turn of the Fourteenth-Century: The Social, Economic and Cultural Environment of Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*,'" unpublished PhD diss. (University of Birmingham, 1984), pp. 42-85 (chapter 2, 'The Social Structure of south Lincolnshire at the End of the Thirteenth Century') in which it emerges that the region was not dominated by any single lord, but contained a conflation of minor nobles.

‘families of more than local importance.’⁸⁰ The vast majority of Sempringham’s benefactors were relatively minor members of the knightly class. The pre-eminent house of the order was endowed by families that had relatively limited lands and properties to go with their titles, families for whom the possession of vernacular books would have been novel. The Barons’ wars, late in the reign of Henry III, in which the Lincolnshire seigniorial class were deeply complicit, had left a legacy of debt throughout the county’s peerage. Huge debts to the Crown were inherited by the heirs of those who had fought against Henry III, and Edward I proved eager to collect these. Major landholders near Sempringham, such as the Gant family, may have felt ill-disposed to make endowments to the Priory when they had so recently incurred a massive £2,000 penalty for their complicity in rebellion.⁸¹ War with Scotland was also exacting a heavy burden from Lincolnshire’s knightly class with early deaths resulting in numerous failures to continue family lineage.⁸² There was as a result a change in the face of the Lincolnshire seigniorial class, and by the early fourteenth century only half of the baronial estates had passed from the hands of their Domesday owners.⁸³

The dissemination context of Mannyng’s text thus contrasts powerfully with its Anglo-Norman source, the *Manuel des Peches*, and with later examples of vernacular religious texts from monastic progenitors that proliferated successfully like Nicholas Love’s *Mirror*, a text that the Carthusian prior communicated to two of the greatest magnate families in England. Such texts were produced with wealthy and influential patron audiences in mind who acted as conduits for the text’s dispersal and transmission. With the cataclysm of the pestilence in the mid-fourteenth century, a disaster from which Gilbertine income and influence never recovered, *Handlyng Synne* it seems, had little chance of finding audiences that might have allowed it to spread widely. Robert

⁸⁰ Golding, p. 276; also see E. M. Poynton, ‘Charters Relating to the Priory of Sempringham’, *The Genealogist* 15-17 (1899-1901); (1899–) pp. 158-61, 221-227; (1900–) 30-35, 76-83, 153-158, 223-228 ; (1901–) 29-35, 164-168, 232-239 (p. 161).

⁸¹ See Platts, ‘South Lincolnshire’ 51-62 and H. C. Maxwell Lyte, ed., *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1258-66* (London: H.M.S.O, 1910) part III, p. 83.

⁸² For further discussion of the political and economic impact of the Scottish wars see Thorlac Turville-Petre, ‘Politics’, pp. 7-11.

⁸³ See Graham Platts, *Land and People in Medieval Lincolnshire* (Lincoln: Committee for the Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology, 1985), p. 27 ff.

Mannyng's initiative, where his text would provide pious entertainment for manorial communities, quite simply, may have been unfulfilled. *Handlyng Synne*, despite the ambitions and the imaginings of its author, was perhaps always doomed to a limited circulation.