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Opprobrious Language and the Development of the Vernacular in Fifteenth-Century England

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with how the development of the social and political status of the vernacular in the fifteenth century amplified concerns about the disruptive capacity of opprobrious language. Using a range of religious, moral and political literatures composed in English, it identifies the vocabularies used to represent opprobrious language, who was using them, and for what purpose. It examines how the widening use of English took place against a backdrop of social transitions and increasing disorder which tested both the definition and boundaries of acceptable language. In particular, the thesis argues that the growth of the political consciousness of the common people and their acquisition of literacy complicated the way that opprobrious language was officially identified and proscribed. As such, the capacity of contemptuous words to collapse social boundaries and undermine authority was not only deemed a threat to stability, but was also recognised as a means to acquire power and influence and assert new identities. The simultaneous proscription and exploitation of opprobrious language by different social groups thus identifies how the boundaries of what could and could not be said shifted in relation to the politics of language change.

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Abbreviations

BL	British Library, London
EETS	Early English Text Society
MED	*Middle English Dictionary*
NA	National Archives, Kew (Public Record Office)
NLS	National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh
NLW	National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

Contents

Abstract
Acknowledgements
Abbreviations

Introduction		1
Chapter 1	**Exemplifying Opprobrious Language in the *Alphabet Tales***	21
	1.1 Exemplary language and motifs	24
	1.1.1 Tales about opprobrious language	25
	1.1.2 Tales about sacred words	31
	1.1.3 Tales about confession	34
	1.2 Adapting and interpreting the *Alphabet Tales*: Some examples from *Jacob's Well*	37
	1.3 Vernacular politics and cultural negotiation	41
	1.4 Conclusion	47
Chapter 2	**Moral Verses on Opprobrious Language and the Shaping of Popular Culture**	49
	2.1 Thematic development: The subject of opprobrious language in the Vernon lyrics	52
	2.2 Thematic development: The particularisation and popularisation of fifteenth-century moral verses on opprobrious language	58
	2.3 Linguistic instability in Lydgate's moral lyrics	73
	2.4 Conclusion	85
Chapter 3	**The Politicisation of Opprobrious Language: Rumour and Seditious Speech**	88
	3.1 Politicising language	94
	3.2 Interpreting seditious speech	105
	3.3 Rumour and popular politics	116
	3.4 Conclusion	128
Chapter 4	**The Politics of Writing and Report in the Paston Letters**	130
	4.1 Representing fame and dispute	134
	4.2 Defining disorder	146
	4.3 Courting popular opinion	153
	4.4 The politics of report	158
	4.5 Conclusion	167
Chapter 5	**Opprobrious Language and the Definition of Deviance in the *Coventry Leet Book***	170
	5.1 Defining misconduct	174
	5.2 Defining opprobrious language	181
	5.3 Changing contexts	186
	5.4 Internal politics: The case of Laurence Saunders	198

	5.5 Conclusion	210
Chapter 6	**Conclusion**	
	6.1 Opprobrious language and the development of the vernacular	212
	6.2 A model for fifteenth-century vernacular development	217
	6.3 Further work	219
Appendix 1	Lyrics on opprobrious language	222
Appendix 2	Lyrics on opprobrious language grouped by manuscript	227
Appendix 3	Cases of seditious speech	229
Appendix 4	Cases of seditious speech grouped by type	234
Bibliography		235

Introduction

This thesis is an examination of the role of opprobrious language in the development of the status of English as an official language. Following Peter Burke's call for a social history of language, and the so-called 'linguistic turn' in historical studies, greater awareness has been paid to the position and significance of language in history.[1] Deviant language has been a source of particular interest, for 'when words are pushed to their expressive limits they expose the boundaries of acceptable speech';[2] consequently, as anthropologists and sociolinguists have recognised, studying the use and significance of opprobrious language can enable the linguistic values of a society to be reconstructed.[3]

'Opprobrious language' is a term used infrequently in the study of linguistic deviance and its use here requires clarification. Derived directly from Latin, the noun 'opprobrium' indicates infamy or disgrace. The term was current in the medieval period, and as an adjective was often used to identify language that was considered to be severely scornful or abusive. The *MED* contains few examples of the term's use, citing Chartier's *Quadrilogue Invectif* and Trevisa's translation of Higden's *Polychronicon*. However, 'opprobrious language' was commonly used in Latin urban records and it is possible that the focus of the *MED* upon literary and printed texts obscures the appearance of the term in vernacular writing.[4] In using the term here, it is the term's general meaning instead of the specifics of its use that is privileged. Opprobrious language is not considered in relation to any single register or vocabulary but rather as a term that represents any language expressive of contempt or resistance. Not only does this include language that was openly hostile but also

[1] Peter Burke, 'Introduction' in *The Social History of Language*, ed. Peter Burke and Roy Porter, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 1.
[2] Carl Lindahl, *Earnest Games: Folkloric Patterns in the* Canterbury Tales, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 73.
[3] See, for instance, Lars-Gunnar Andersson and Peter Trudgill, *Bad Language*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1966); Edmund Leach, 'Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse', in *New Directions in the Study of Language*, ed. E. H. Lenneburg, (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1964), pp. 23-63.
[4] Although beyond the scope of the current study, it is possible that a fuller catalogue of the term's use in both Latin and English would enlarge the scope of the term 'opprobrious' and its contemporary relevance beyond modern understandings of its meaning. For a preliminary attempt to use fifteenth-century English-Latin dictionaries to establish the contemporary meanings of the taboo words used by Chaucer and his literary successors, see Thomas W. Ross, 'Taboo-Words in Fifteenth-Century English', in *Fifteenth-Century Studies*, ed. R. F. Yeager, (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1984).

language which was rendered exceptional by changing perceptions of what constituted acceptable and unacceptable language.

In the field of medieval studies, various forms of opprobrious expression have been examined within particular literatures and contexts. Obscenities represent the most prominent register of opprobrious language and thus have received the most attention in critical study. Use of vulgar language in courtly literature could be advocated upon the grounds that its directness was preferable to ornate rhetoric, yet the same language could also be considered highly improper and was liable to censorship.[5] Obscene language opposes the ideals of gentility and is often used in contemporary literature to distinguish characters of different social status. Notions of linguistic opprobrium thus not only identify what can and cannot be said, but also underline other social taboos. As anthropologists and sociolinguists have observed, insults are often founded upon binaries such as ugly/beautiful and dirty/clean which replicate fundamental cultural limits.[6] Consequently, medieval obscenities frequently invoke ideas of pollution and degradation and in doing so reinforce the marginalisation of social groups excluded upon the basis of disease, sexual orientation, religious belief, or gender.[7] Yet as Edmund Leach has argued, 'It is not the case that certain kinds of behaviour are taboo and that, therefore, the language relating to such behaviour becomes taboo'.[8] Instead, the continued existence of bad language in any society is a measure of the 'covert prestige' that its use confers. Whereas authorised languages are associated with power and hierarchy, unauthorised languages express toughness and strength.[9] Although insults replicate social boundaries, they also represent the power conferred upon individuals who overstep

[5] The use of vulgarity in the designation of 'proper' speech has been a significant topic in studies of the *Roman de la Rose*; see David F. Hult, 'Words and Deeds: Jean de Meun's *Romance of the Rose* and the Hermeneutics of Censorship', *New Literary History* 28 (1997), 345-66; Alastair J. Minnis, *Magister Amoris: The* Roman de la Rose *and Vernacular Hermeneutics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
[6] Andersson and Trudgill, *Bad Language*, p. 35.
[7] On the nature of medieval obscenity, see Nicola F. McDonald, ed., *Medieval Obscenities*, (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2006), and Jan M. Ziolkowski, ed., *Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages*, (Leiden, Boston, and Cologne: Brill, 1998). For work treating marginalised social groups, see Michael Goodrich, ed., *Other Middle Ages: Witnesses at the Margins of Medieval Society*, (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1998), and Jeffrey Richards, *Sex, Dissidence and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).
[8] Leach, 'Anthropological Aspects of Language', pp. 24-5.
[9] Andersson and Trudgill, *Bad Language*, p. 8.

them. The capacity of opprobrious language to both marginalise and empower is central to its impact.

The implications of using obscene language have been studied most extensively in relation to drama. Because the plays were concerned to represent the sinfulness of mankind and the need for redemption, both the moralities and cycle plays make liberal use of opprobrious registers. Analysis of this language has largely focused upon its dramaturgical function rather than its social and cultural significance. Janette Dillon, Martin Stevens, Cecilia Pietropoli, and Geoff Lester have argued that the cycle plays make a binary distinction between the Latinate language of the virtuous characters and the crude vernacular spoken by the evil characters.[10] Opprobrious language is associated with the expression of doubt, dissent, or complete alienation from God, promoting a 'verbal stereotyping' that permits audiences to identify behavioural types and explore questions of faith and virtue.[11] Such is especially the case with the morality play *Mankind*, where the rich scatological language of the vices functions to alert the audience to the dangers of idle speech.[12] Yet although intended to perform an exemplary function, Lynn Forest-Hill has also acknowledged that the disruptive nature of deviant language generated a range of responses to these plays.[13] Establishing whether offensive language inspired laughter or affront is often only determinable by the context and time of a performance.[14] Using offensive or prohibited words in staged confrontations could enable local

[10] Janette Dillon, *Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Martin Stevens, 'Language as Theme in the Wakefield Plays', *Speculum* 52 (1977), 100-17, and *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual and Critical Interpretations*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987); Cecilia Pietropoli, 'The Characterisation of Evil in the Towneley Plays', *Medieval English Theatre* 11 (1989), 85-93; Geoff Lester, 'Idle Words: Stereotyping by Language in the English Mystery Plays', *Medieval English Theatre* 11 (1989), 129-39.
[11] Lester, 'Idle Words', p. 132.
[12] See Paula Neuss, 'Active and Idle Language: Dramatic Images in 'Mankind,'' in *Medieval Drama*, ed. Neville Denny, (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), pp. 41-67; Kathleen Ashley, 'Titivillus and the Battle of Words in 'Mankind'', *Annuale Medievale* 16 (1975), 128-50; Andrew Taylor, ''To Pley a Pagyn of þe Devyl': Turpiloquium and the Scurrae in Early Drama', *Medieval English Theatre* 11 (1989), 162-174. Liliana Sikorska, '*Mankind* and the Question of Power Dynamics: Some Remarks on the Validity of Sociolinguistic Reading', *Neuphilogische Mitteilungen* 92 (1996), 201-16, takes a theoretical approach.
[13] Lynn Forest-Hill, *Transgressive Language in Medieval English Drama: Signs of Challenge and Change*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).
[14] Forest-Hill, *Transgressive Language*, pp. 37, 56.

discontent to be diffused in licensed expression or promote disruption by heightening existing tensions.[15]

In being liable to provoke unexpected responses, opprobrious language could constitute any controversial utterance. A number of studies treating the use of slander, detraction, and swearing in the fourteenth century have identified the disruptive potential of such language. For instance, Carl Lindahl has addressed Chaucer's use of confrontational language in relation to its impact upon personal fame, while Marion Turner has examined the poet's writings as part of the hostile exchanges witnessed in late fourteenth-century London.[16] Treating blasphemy, Edwin Craun has explored how the Church sought to control defamation of the deity, and the influence that this pastoral discourse had upon representations of linguistic deviance in late fourteenth-century literature.[17] Alternatively, Michael Hanrahan has noted how slander offered the 'means to structure political contest' during times of political upheaval, a practice that became especially prominent during the reign of Richard II.[18] Although treating different forms of slander, all of these studies share a common understanding of its power to challenge authority by ignoring the distinctions of hierarchy. As Lindahl has argued, 'no other sort of language crosses social barriers more effectively than insult'.[19]

As a result of its capacity to contravene social boundaries, opprobrious language was not only used to subvert but also to voice discontent and make powerful political statements. Steven Justice and Richard Firth Green have examined the rhetoric used by the 1381 rebels as a representation of popular literacy and the

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[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 20-2, 51, 59; Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles*, p. 86. For a useful reassessment of the idea that festive drama and carnival performed a 'safety-valve' effect, see Chris Humphrey, *The Politics of Carnival: Festive Misrule in Medieval England*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001). For the classic study of the staging of the cycle plays as a reinforcement of the civic body, see Mervyn James, 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval Town', *Past and Present* 98 (1983), 3-29.

[16] Lindahl, *Earnest Games*; Marion Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth-Century London*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

[17] Edwin D. Craun, '"Inordinata Locutio"': Blasphemy in Pastoral Literature, 1200-1500', *Traditio* 39 (1983), 135-62, and *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature: Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[18] Michael Hanrahan, 'Defamation as Political Contest during the Reign of Richard II', *Medium Ævum* 72 (2003), 259-76.

[19] Lindahl, *Earnest Games*, p. 73.

influence of heterodox beliefs.[20] Indeed, it has been argued that the voices and writings of protest heard in 1381 marked the beginning of a backlash against official authority which 'seriously challenged the traditional meanings and implications of literacy as an elitist activity representative and supportive of the divinely ordained hierarchy'.[21] The implications of this challenge have largely been confined to the late fourteenth century, however. Studies of fifteenth-century political discourse by Paul Strohm and John Watts have focused upon the formation of official discourses of statecraft.[22] Although these discourses often responded to oppositional voices, the location of such criticism in a continuous tradition of dissent beginning in 1381 limits its impact. Furthermore, the fact that much protest literature invokes traditional topoi has led to the argument that the language of popular politics was not in itself innovative, but was derived from official rhetoric and simply redirected back at the ruling regime.[23] What is in question then is not so much the political language itself as what it is used to represent.

Beyond studies of political protest at a national level, studies of the prosecution of opprobrious language in local courts have revealed a similar concern with maintaining order and hierarchy. Marjorie McIntosh has particularly made the case that both deviant language and the language used to describe deviance became significant concerns in the fifteenth century. She identifies how backbiting became a subject of greater moral focus during the first half of the fifteenth century than other forms of deviant expression such as scolding or querulous speech.[24] Backbiting was especially associated with the production of social discord in contemporary moral literature. As the structure of society began to alter as a result of the demographic

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[20] Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*, (Berkeley and London: University of California, 1994); Richard Firth Green, 'John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature', in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 176-200.

[21] W. Mark Ormrod, 'The Use of English: Language, Law, and Political Culture in Fourteenth-Century England', *Speculum* 78 (2003), p. 783.

[22] Paul Strohm, *Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); John L. Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[23] John L. Watts, 'The Pressure of the Public on Later Medieval Politics', in *The Fifteenth Century IV: Political Culture in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. Linda Clark and Christine Carpenter, (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), pp. 159-80.

[24] Marjorie K. McIntosh, 'Finding Language for Misconduct: Jurors in Fifteenth-Century Local Courts', in *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 94.

changes experienced in the fourteenth century, backbiting was regarded as a sign of envy among those who were jealous of their neighbours' prosperity.[25] Tensions arising from social and economic disparities could be especially marked in close-knit local communities, resulting in a steady stream of defamation cases.[26] These pressures in turn influenced the language used to classify disorder, so that emergent social concerns can be read in the prosecution of deviance. For McIntosh, the records of fifteenth-century leet courts display an increasing concern with infringements of governance rather than simply disturbances of the peace. These changes in the perception of disorder recognise how deviant actions were coming to be measured according to their political as well as moral ramifications.[27]

The studies surveyed above indicate the potential for studying opprobrious language. They display a common awareness of the disruptiveness of opprobrious language and how it could be used to test or overstep social boundaries. However, despite the apparent comprehensiveness of these studies, there has been little sustained or detailed investigation of the subject. Often these studies are limited to the examination of particular texts or narrow time periods and reinforce prevailing critical interests rather than seeking to extend them. Consequently, there is little appreciation of how social and cultural change might impinge upon the status of the languages in question. In particular, the provocative and destabilising power of opprobrious language is often considered to be innate rather than conferred by the circumstances of its use and relationship with other discourses. It is also important to realise that although bad language often replicates social taboos, it is not actually bad itself, but is simply rendered so by the ideologies which surround language.[28] Thus, as Burke has argued:

> although languages are partially autonomous they cannot be understood without reference to the society in which they are spoken,

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 94. See also Marjorie K. McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehaviour in England, 1370-1600*, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1998), chap. 8.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 111. On defamation cases and the ecclesiastical courts, see Karen Jones and Michael Zell, 'Bad Conversation? Gender and Social Control in a Kentish Borough, c. 1450-c.1570', *Continuity and Change* 13 (1998), 11-31; Larry R. Poos, 'Sex, Lies, and the Church Courts of Pre-Reformation England', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 25 (1995), 585-607; Richard M. Wunderli, *London Church Courts and Society on the Eve of the Reformation*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Medieval Academy of America, 1981).
[27] McIntosh, 'Finding Language', p. 95.
[28] Andersson and Trudgill, *Bad Language*, pp. 187-9.

> and that 'society' includes not only the different social groups and their ways of life but the basic political, economic and technological structures as well.[29]

There is clearly a need to go beyond simply contextualising opprobrious language to ask more rigorous questions about its status and use. In order to understand what makes opprobrious language exceptional, the position of the speaker or writer, where and when they use such language, and to what end, are considerations that should be addressed. Furthermore, it must also be noted that notions of opprobrium were not necessarily universal; what was deemed to be threatening or subversive by one group may have been regarded simply as a revelation of truth or an assertion of identity to another. Linguistic opprobrium was not a fixed category, and the negotiations and conflicts inspired by attempts to determine it reveal fundamental social and cultural processes.

Approaching language as an active representation of a society rather than just a product of it is a strategy that has been advanced by some recent critical studies. A number of literary scholars have followed the sociolinguistic principle that language is a social process, where linguistic choices cannot be separated from the political and ideological contexts of their use.[30] As Helen Barr summarises:

> Social structures and behaviour determine language practices but language practices also have effects on social structures and behaviour. This is because the materiality of language inheres in orders of discourse which produce, and are produced by, social institutions and conventions.[31]

Language may be a means of communication intended to articulate ideas, but it is also a medium that embodies social conflict. The political dimensions of language have often been explored in relation to the maintenance of social power. For instance, Norman Fairclough has identified the dialectical relationship between discourse and

[29] Burke, 'Introduction' in *Social History of Language*, p. 15.
[30] See, for instance, Tim William Machan, *English in the Middle Ages*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and Helen Barr, *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). For sociological and anthropological approaches to linguistics, see William A. Foley, *Anthropological Linguistics: An Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); Alessandro Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); J. Milroy and L. Milroy, *Authority in Language: Investigating Language Prescription and Standardisation*, (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).
[31] Barr, *Socioliterary Practice*, p. 1.

social structures which is always present in political relationships and power struggles.[32] That discourses are expressions and constructions of hegemonic power is now widely recognised.[33] Yet because culture is plural rather than singular, these dominant codes are also subject to multiple interpretations and processes of appropriation.[34] As J. G. A. Pocock has argued, once words have been uttered, their meaning can never fully be controlled. As a result, the history of these utterances is multiple and centres upon different moments when these words achieve meaning. Pocock therefore proposes that in order to understand a political culture, it is necessary to identify the languages which prescribe what can and cannot be said in it.[35]

Ascertaining what is linguistically acceptable and unacceptable is only half the issue, however. Linguistic anthropologists regard language as being both constitutive of hierarchy and the medium by which hierarchy is mediated and upheld.[36] Although each speaker expresses an individual outlook through speech, language is also the medium by which social bodies suppress independence by grouping individuals into collectives. Conflict arises from such processes because the categories that are imposed can never be totally comprehensive:

> such a tension is possible above all because of the basic indeterminacy of any linguistic characterization and categorization. Although words and sentences do a good job at describing reality for most purposes, they can never exhaust it. Any description is a categorization and any categorization is too large and too narrow.[37]

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[32] Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*, (Harlow: Longman, 1989), p. 37.

[33] On discourse theory, see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan-Smith, (London: Routledge, 1992), and Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. J. B. Thompson, trans. G. Raymond and M. Adamson, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). For the idea of cultural hegemony as proposed by Antonio Gramsci, see T. Bennett *et al.*, eds., *Culture, Ideology and Social Process*, (London: Batsford, 1981), pp. 191-218.

[34] Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology*, p. 36. For the application of this idea in relation to medieval studies, see Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 6, and Elisabeth E. Salter, *Cultural Creativity in the Early English Renaissance: Popular Culture in Town and Country*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 44.

[35] J. G. A. Pocock, 'Languages and their Implications: The Transformation of the Study of Political Thought', in *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock, (New York: Atheneum, 1973), pp. 22-4.

[36] Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology*, p. 337.

[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 335-6.

Such tensions are inherent in any definition of opprobrious language, because to call language 'opprobrious' is to impose the value judgment of an overseeing authority. As language became more controversial in the medieval period, a comprehensive legal vocabulary was developed to classify and disable it. This legislation against opprobrious language may not provide insight into the actual nature of the language in question, but how it was talked about is revealing of the cultural tensions that it inspired. Deviance is always defined in contrast to normative behaviour, denying the existence of any alternative values. Yet by imposing such a strict division, it is those middling beliefs that are potentially most dangerous because there is no language available for their definition. As Edmund Leach has observed, it is not only what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable that is significant in a culture, but also what is deemed more acceptable or less acceptable.[38] Liminal categories enable the mediation of binaries but are also 'the focus of the greatest cultural elaboration'.[39]

An awareness of how these categories are negotiated indicates the potential to explore a range of responses to opprobrious language.[40] Legislation against opprobrious language may have been presented as being non-negotiable, yet because the dissemination of these laws was reliant upon language, discrepancies could always arise. Indeed, any text that discusses or attempts to impart a particular idea about language use might be more appropriately considered as an interface for cultural negotiation. Paul Strohm has suggested that

> we come closer to the dynamics of linguistic process when we look first to see how language is deployed in actual situations, taking as an analytical starting point what a text is and *does*, rather than what it was intended to do.[41]

Rather than drawing a strict divide between intention and effect as Strohm does, it is perhaps more fruitful to consider the conflict generated by writers' attempts to pre-empt reception and impose meaning. This is not to say that texts cannot inspire unexpected or unwanted meanings, but that where an emotive subject like

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[38] Leach, 'Anthropological Aspects of Language', pp. 45, 62. Leach's argument is an extension of Lévi-Strauss's theory of binary oppositions as outlined in *Le pensée sauvage*, (Paris: Plon, 1962).

[39] Foley, *Anthropological Linguistics*, p. 102.

[40] On the negotiation of cultural categories in the making and re-making of individual interpretation, see Salter, *Cultural Creativity*, pp. 44-6.

[41] Strohm, *Politique*, p. 7 (author's italics).

opprobrious language is concerned, we might discern a more calculated and deliberate construction. This is particularly true of writers who use opprobrious language to exploit its disruptive effects or discredit rivals. These writers often command positions of power and authority, so that their use of opprobrious language runs counter to their proscription of its use in the rest of society. Practising such double standards is not unusual, but it would appear that they became more pronounced in the second half of the fifteenth century as order broke down, marking the growth of divisions in the ruling body. Tactics like these suggest an environment where opprobrious language was being manipulated to achieve crucial political advantages.

Attempts to capitalise upon the contentions surrounding opprobrious language indicate the existence of much more deeply rooted issues about social regulation. Notions of opprobrium are essentially informed by fears about the damaging effects of defamatory comments and the need to limit criticism. Lindahl has thus argued that 'the intent of...slander actions was to preserve social stability (and therefore the social order in general)'.[42] Examining the legislation produced against blasphemy in early sixteenth-century Venice, Elizabeth Horodowich has contended that the emphasis upon controlling profane words derived from issues of civic control created by recent social changes and economic downturns.[43] The authorities' attempts to control language use hinged upon the recurrence of the *questione della lingua*, where the attempt to standardise language represented the need to silence alternative voices.[44] In transitional situations like these, legislation against opprobrious language is not simply preventative but acknowledges the threat posed by those who are using it. Similar fears arose in fifteenth-century England as the development of English as a national language began to take place. Because the impact of vernacular development was not uniform across society, conflicting opinions arose among different social groups about what its use might enable. At the heart of these controversies were apprehensions about the effect of a common linguistic culture upon traditional social boundaries. This thesis contends that it was the need to reinstate these margins that caused perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable language to alter.

[42] Lindahl, *Earnest Games*, p. 75.
[43] Elizabeth Horodowich, 'Civic Identity and the Control of Blasphemy in Sixteenth-Century Venice', *Past and Present* 181 (2003), pp. 21-3.
[44] *Ibid.*, p. 26. On the *questione della lingua* in modern European languages, see Jonathan Steinberg, 'The Historian and the *Questione della Lingua*', in *The Social History of Language*, pp. 198-209.

However, establishing the precise causes of why English became so controversial have been hampered by prevailing perceptions of the fifteenth century as a period of stasis and decline. That greater attention was paid to opprobrious language in this period is often observed, yet there has been little attempt to explain why this was so. Despite the recent interest displayed in reappraising fifteenth-century literary culture, the need to approach the period apologetically still remains.[45] Fifteenth-century literature has divided critics into two camps: those who perceive it as a postscript to Chaucer, and those who regard it as a precursor to the Early Modern.[46] Those favouring the former approach, such as David Wallace and David Lawton, argue that literary production declined in quality after 1400 as a result of the Lancastrian need to limit public voices.[47] James Simpson has alternatively argued that the notion of fifteenth-century literary stagnation was the product of Tudor 'political injunction and cultural imperative'. In the attempt to erase memories of the political struggles that had given rise to the Tudor regime, Chaucer was reborn as England's national poet and a new literary tradition was founded.[48] Taking a narrative approach to the study of fifteenth-century literature means that interpretation is always focused upon points of departure at the beginning or end of the century. Histories of the English language frequently replicate this pattern by making general claims about the 'rise of the middle class' and overlooking the tensions occasioned by linguistic change.[49] Although following a rough chronology, this thesis takes an alternative

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[45] John L. Watts, 'Introduction: History, the Fifteenth Century and the Renaissance', in *The End of the Middle Ages? England in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, ed. Watts, (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), p. 2, citing Rosemary Horrox, ed., *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 1.

[46] Daniel Wakelin, *Humanism, Reading, and English Literature, 1430-1530*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.4-5.

[47] David Wallace, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. xxi-xxii, 637-9; David Lawton, 'Dullness and the Fifteenth Century', *ELH* 54 (1987), 761-99, esp. p. 793.

[48] James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution: Oxford English Literary History volume 2, 1350-1547*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 42, 67.

[49] The fifteenth century rarely receives consideration in histories of the English language beyond references to Chancery English, even in social and cultural histories. See, for example, Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, fifth edition, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Gerry Knowles, *A Cultural History of the English Language*, (London: Arnold, 1997); Dick Leith, *A Social History of English*, second edition, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); R. F. Jones, *The Triumph of the English Language: A Survey of Opinions Concerning the Vernacular from the Introduction of Printing to the Restoration*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1953). For a linguistic study of Middle English, see Norman F. Blake, ed., *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, vol. II 1066-1476, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

approach by considering texts according to the contingency of immediate circumstances rather than as part of a grand narrative. In doing so, it seeks to uphold the value of fifteenth-century study in its own right.[50]

The fifteenth century was a period of marked upheaval and change, all of which can be read in a studies of the language used in the period.[51] The legislation introduced by the Church to curb the growth of heterodoxy has particularly been identified as contributing to the politics of language change. During the first decade of the fifteenth century, a rigorous programme of religious censorship was imposed. Archbishop Arundel's *Constitutions*, published in 1409, prohibited the translation of the Bible into English and sought to prevent unauthorised preaching in the vernacular. The *Constitutions* complemented the 1401 statute, *De Heretico Comburendo*, which permitted heretics to be burnt. These draconian measures were essentially a response to the use of English by the Lollards to promulgate their beliefs to the laity. In doing so, the Lollards forged an independent vernacular culture which threatened to overturn the Church's claim to be the custodian of religious truths. Nicholas Watson has argued that the *Constitutions* cut short the vernacular literary culture that blossomed in the last quarter of the fourteenth century.[52] Other critics have also emphasised the impact of the *Constitutions* upon religious writing of the period, particularly medieval drama.[53] Although the success of these official measures in combating heresy has been questioned, they nonetheless exerted a strong ideological influence that can be measured by the politicisation of vernacular writing.[54]

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[50] On the importance of considering the contingency of contextual factors upon texts, see Salter, *Cultural Creativity*, p. 46, and Stohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, p. 6. By considering localised and short-term contingencies I do not imply that long-term changes were not taking place in literary production or that they were not significant.

[51] Studies which have urged the need for greater linguistic awareness in fifteenth-century studies include Christine Carpenter, 'Political and Constitutional History: Before and After McFarlane', in *The McFarlane Legacy: Studies in Late Medieval Politics and Society*, ed. Richard H. Britnell, and A. J. Pollard, (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1995), pp. 195-6. John L. Watts, 'Conclusion', in Watts, *The End of the Middle Ages? England in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, ed. John L. Watts, (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), p. 267, and Strohm, *Politique*, p. 4.

[52] Nicholas Watson, 'Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409', *Speculum* 70 (1995), 822-64.

[53] Lynn Forest-Hill, '*Mankind* and the Fifteenth-Century Preaching Controversy', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 15 (2003), 17-42; Janette Dillon, '*Mankind* and the Politics of 'Englysch Laten'', *Medievalia et Humanistica* 20 (1993), 41-64.

[54] For an assessment of the effectiveness of Arundel's *Constitutions*, see Helen Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 163-88, 182-3.

Underlying these religious controversies were long-term social changes that marked users of the vernacular as being socially progressive. As a consequence of the massive depopulation caused by the Black Death in the mid fourteenth century, social groups of low to middling status achieved greater economic freedom and began to move up the social scale. Strohm has argued that by the late fourteenth century the middling groups of society had come to constitute a new social category. The fact that their gentle status had been gained through service or trade rather than landownership exemplified a growing rift between the traditional social hierarchy and the social circumstances that it operated within.[55] The fragmentation of traditional social structures increased in the fifteenth century when, as I. M. W. Harvey has observed, social groups, particularly in the lower strata of society, began to merge and overlap, raising issues of identification and classification.[56] Rising status not only conferred privilege upon these groups but also political advantage. Their growing political consciousness is witnessed in petitions, cases of seditious speech, and complaint writing. As with the adoption of the vernacular by the Lollards, the use of English among these groups confirmed its status as a language of dissent.

Linking both religious controversies about the use of English and the social status of its users was the growth of literacy. Harvey notes that social climbing was often coincident with the acquisition of literate skills.[57] This is not to say that literacy became widespread, or that it replaced oral communication, but that more people became familiar with the written word.[58] In particular, it is the capacity of literacy to enable the spread of ideas and create group networks that is significant here. The existence of reading networks show how books circulated among communities of readers, while the letters and manifestos circulated during rebellions show how

[55] Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 10.
[56] I. M. W. Harvey, 'Was there Popular Politics in Fifteenth-Century England?', in *The McFarlane Legacy: Studies in Late Medieval Politics and Society*, ed. Richard H. Britnell, and A. J. Pollard, (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1995), p. 159.
[57] *Ibid.*
[58] On the extent of literacy in the medieval period, see Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record. England 1066-1307*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), and Jo Ann Hoeppner Moran, *The Growth of English Schooling, 1348-1548: Learning, Literacy, and Laicization in Pre-Reformation York Diocese*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985). For the argument that orality continued to be as significant as private, silent reading in the fifteenth century, see Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

participants were increasingly mustered by written as well as spoken commands.[59] Successive fifteenth-century governments acknowledged this potential and increasingly used English in proclamations and newsletters to communicate their policies to the public and gain support. As a result, the divide between popular and elite culture became less marked. As Watts has argued:

> more people were being more directly and continuously exposed to language, to a sense of shared knowledge, to oft-repeated modes of description and expression...as English became the medium for a widening range of administrative, political, social and religious discourse, so its vocabulary grew and its structures became clearer and more expressive. Ideas could move about more easily, both within a wider social space and cross the boundaries of different specialisms.[60]

Watts envisages the increasing use of English as a process of standardisation, where the spread of ideas through shared discourses created a kind of cultural integration. Yet although a wider social cross-section may have been exposed to a common language, the tensions that accompanied this should not be overlooked. Indeed, in attempting to break down pre-existing barriers, greater friction was generated.

The conflicts surrounding the growing use of English in the fifteenth century mean that its development can be charted in a number of ways. In her study of bilingualism, Linda Ehrsam Voigts identifies five main areas of scholarship concerned with language change: scholarship on Anglo-Norman; studies of macaronic writings, especially Siegfried Wenzel's study of macaronic sermons;[61] work conducted by the Finnish school of language analysis; the rise of Chancery English; and examination of the impact of Arundel's *Constitutions*. To these, Voigts adds an important sixth category: scientific texts. The macaronic composition of these texts identifies how the use of English developed alongside the continuation of Latin rather than simply replacing it. Furthermore, as with the translation of philosophical texts during the fifteenth century, Voigts notes that scientific texts represent a non-political

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[59] On the reading networks associated with common-profit books, see Wendy Scase, 'Reginald Pecock, John Carpenter and John Colop's 'Common-Profit' Books: Aspects of Book Ownership and Circulation in Fifteenth-Century London', *Medium Ævum* 60 (1991), 261-74. On the use of letters and political poetry in Cade's Revolt, see I. M. W. Harvey, *Jack Cade's Revolt of 1450*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 75-7.

[60] Watts, 'Conclusion', in Watts, *The End of the Middle Ages?*, p. 268.

[61] Siegfried Wenzel, *Macaronic Sermons: Bilingualism and Preaching in Late-Medieval England*, (Ann Arbor; University of Michigan Press, 1994).

use of the vernacular. Her study reveals how the politicisation of English centred upon certain vernaculars and how they were used.[62]

In the areas of vernacular scholarship identified by Voigts, the predominant approach to linguistic development has been to identify official attitudes towards English use and pursue ideas of standardisation. The religious politics surrounding English use remains the most strongly developed field. Anne Hudson's preliminary work on Lollard vocabulary identifies a distinctive language developed by the sect to challenge the orthodox church and assert its identity.[63] However, Andrew Cole has recently argued that the conspicuousness of this vocabulary indicates its availability to be manipulated by orthodox polemicists when constructing Lollard subjects.[64] Fiona Somerset's study of 'extraclergial' writing provides an important contrast to the study of heterodox representation by examining the translation of academic texts for lay audiences in the period 1370-1410. Producing 'a highly controversial sort of translation', these texts provide an early indication of how the shift from Latin to English might be regarded as encouraging a redistribution or even disendowment of clerical authority.[65] These studies share a common interest in exploring the interplay between orthodoxy and heresy, especially with regard to the way that institutional or academic rhetoric is modified and defended in the process. Rather than necessarily examining examples of actual language use, they are concerned with changes in the position and status of ideologies relating to language. As such, these studies often terminate with the imposition of censorship, when religious discussion in English became precarious.

Study of vernacular development after censorship has focused upon the administrative and governmental use of English. Thorlac Turville-Petre has identified how the government promoted the use of English in the early fourteenth century as part of a nationalistic programme,[66] while Jeremy Catto has sourced the later

[62] Linda Ehrsam Voigts, 'What's the Word? Bilingualism in Late-Medieval England', *Speculum* 71 (1996), pp. 813-24.
[63] Anne Hudson, 'A Lollard Sect Vocabulary?', in Hudson, *Lollards and their Books*, (London and Ronceverte: Hambledon Press, 1985), pp. 165-80.
[64] Andrew Cole, 'Chaucer's English Lesson', *Speculum* 77 (2002), 1128-67.
[65] Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 4-5.
[66] Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290-1340*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 10.

fourteenth-century development of the language in preaching drives.[67] In the fifteenth century, John Fisher has made detailed studies of the emergence of Chancery English under the Lancastrian monarchs. The eventual ascendancy of this midlands dialect in the form of standard English was linked to the government's centralisation, making it a strongly political language.[68] As Somerset has observed, 'the legitimation of some kinds and contexts of written English tended to suppress or delegitimate others', making Chancery English fundamentally oppositional in status.[69] Likewise, the reinvention of Chaucer as a national poet under the Tudors served to render his English as the dominant literary language of the medieval period. However, as Christopher Cannon has observed, the making of English is not the same matter as Chaucer's English.[70] Recently, a series of colloquium essays in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* have sought to reassess Chaucer's mythical status as the father of English writing.[71] These essays assert the need to decentre Chaucer and replace his writing within a more thoroughly delineated cultural context.

The most comprehensive study to undertake such an investigation is *The Idea of the Vernacular*, an anthology of Middle English texts and essays that upholds the idea that a contemporary vernacular theory informed medieval writing.[72] The texts in *The Idea* are mainly literary, with a focus placed upon the prefaces composed by medieval writers. Although addressing aspects of authorial positioning and textual transmission and reception, the approach of *The Idea* has been criticised by Wendy Scase for not uniting language study with its cultural application. Scase argues for a 'cultural move' in language study that would 'show how writers' knowledge about the uses and meanings of their language shaped their practice'.[73] In making this claim, Scase is particularly responding to Nicholas Watson's essay on 'The Politics of

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[67] Jeremy Catto, 'Written English: The Making of the Language, 1370-1400', *Past and Present* 179 (2003), 24-59.

[68] See especially John H. Fisher, 'A Language Policy for Lancastrian England', *PMLA* 107 (1992), 1168-80, and 'Chancery English and the Emergence of Standard Written English in the Fifteenth Century', *Speculum* 52 (1977), 870-99.

[69] Somerset, *Clerical Discourse*, p. 10.

[70] Christopher Cannon, *The Making of Chaucer's English: A Study of Words*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 9.

[71] Christopher Cannon *et al.*, 'Colloquium: Chaucer and the Future of Language Study', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2002), 301-54.

[72] Jocelyn Wogan-Browne *et al.*, eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999).

[73] Wendy Scase, ''Tolkien, Philology, and *The Reeve's Tale*: Towards the Cultural Move in Middle English Studies', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2002), p. 328.

Middle English Writing' contained in *The Idea*. Although an understanding of the politics surrounding opprobrious language undoubtedly determined how writers used such language, Watson's essay also makes some important points about how an awareness of these actions might be situated within vernacular development. Rather than describe development as a process of standardisation or linked to particular events, Watson argues that basic chronologies of the language give 'little sense of the tensions that accompany language change or of its complexity'.[74] Watson stresses the need to examine 'contemporary *attitudes* toward the written language' so that the intricacies and complexities of the vernacular's evolving political status can be explored.[75]

This thesis considers how an investigation of the use and perception of opprobrious language can be used to understand the changing political status of English in the fifteenth century. Rather than seeking to address the development of the vernacular as a standard language, attention is paid to the developments taking place within and across the multiple vernaculars of different social groups and discourses. Christine Carpenter has argued that in producing more 'detailed studies of the political culture of different social groups and of the way ideas evolved and travelled both geographically and socially', we also need to be aware of the tensions that occurred within groups as well as between them.[76] Therefore, a model of development is proposed where language inheres in and around particular social groups, generating multiple perspectives upon language and a more fluid notion of vernacular progress. Furthermore, because notions of opprobrium are context specific, how competing groups negotiated linguistic meanings in their attempts to re-establish, reposition, or extend the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable expression provides crucial evidence of changes in their linguistic status. Uncovering these negotiations is not simply a matter of examining opposing positions but also examining the interactions that were taking place between these binaries. By taking an intermediate position, a more fluid exchange of ideas can be considered beyond linear notions of development.

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[74] Nicholas Watson, 'The Politics of Middle English Writing', in *Idea of the Vernacular*, p. 333.
[75] *Ibid*., p. 331 (author's italics).
[76] Christine Carpenter, 'Introduction: Political Culture, Politics and Cultural History', in *The Fifteenth Century* IV, pp. 5, 16.

In particular, it is important to consider language change as not only originating from official policies, but also with an understanding of how popular reactions to these programmes, and popular usages of language, combined to shape the political identity of English. A lack of direct evidence of popular speech and writing means that often only official attitudes towards language change are privileged in critical studies. Although not claiming to be able to recover 'actual' popular voices, the texts which record or represent opprobrious language are nonetheless treated in this thesis as multivocal constructions. Variations in representation and meaning are regarded as evidence of the dialogues taking place between official and popular expression beyond the text. The vocabularies and opinions produced in these discussions defy straightforward classification and promote a more fluid appreciation of the nature of vernacular development.

My approach in this thesis is twofold. Consideration is paid to how language was politicised according to its use by different groups, and how this status was employed and negotiated in the development of identities and the pursuit of power. Assessment is also made of the nature of these languages through reconstruction of the vocabularies used and examination of changes in their meaning and application. By employing these methods, it is an understanding of how different groups developed particular ideas about what constituted acceptable language that is sought rather than a strict lexical reconstruction. Analysis is qualitative rather than quantitative, with emphasis upon how meanings shift according to the context of their use.[77] These changes can be discerned in the changing use and meaning of certain words, and by the fact that particular registers and forms of language become the subject of social debate, or are associated with specific social groups.

The sources used for this study cover a range of moral, religious, and political subjects and cross traditional divisions between literary and historical sources. In doing so, it is with the aim of reconstructing the ideological structures within which ideas about opprobrious language were shaped and applied rather than simply a disjointed or disconnected survey. I follow Strohm's precedent in regarding 'texts not

[77] For an example of a quantitative approach to the study of political language, see Jean-Philippe Genet, 'New Politics or New Language? The Words of Politics in Yorkist and Early Tudor England', in Watts, *The End of the Middle Ages?*, pp. 23-64.

as finalized 'sources' but as argumentative and interpretative documents in their own right, as historical contestants and as objects of contestation'.[78] Studying the impact of language change and its politicisation is not only a matter of understanding the nature of particular texts but also the environment within which they participated. Therefore, this is an interdisciplinary thesis, one which makes detailed textual case studies whilst seeking to position these texts within a comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural and political environment which was represented by and negotiated through them. Rather than focus upon only one type of text, each chapter addresses a different body of literature in order to establish the contingent factors surrounding these texts' production and the discursive networks within which they were situated. Each chapter is nonetheless linked by a concern to identify the problems arising from attempts to use traditional discourses to respond to changing social and political circumstances; the conflicts created by the formation of new languages; and how the political character of the vernacular was changing.

Chapter one provides an interpretative base for the rest of the thesis. It explores the language and narrative strategies used by the Church to represent deviant and sacred language in popular sermon exempla. It argues that, following the imposition of censorship, the Church was increasingly unable to uphold the singularity of this discourse. As the status of the vernacular changed, so the range of intermediate and alternative beliefs that existed between the Church's binary representations became more visible. The problem of how to respond to this situation is addressed in chapter two. Examining the popularisation of lyrics treating opprobrious language, it explores the tensions created by the attempt to limit speech whilst simultaneously addressing a wider audience. Chapter three addresses how these social tensions were politicised by the destabilisation of national politics, resulting in the reinforcement of the category of seditious speech and fears about the disruptive capacity of rumour. However, this disordered environment also encouraged a fragmentation of official opinion which blurred what was considered acceptable and unacceptable language. These circumstances and their implications are examined in two case studies presented in chapters four and five. Chapter four considers how local

[78] Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, p. 9. A similar attempt to promote a more integrated approach to textual study is advanced by the essays contained in *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

and national concerns intersected in the correspondence of the Paston family, while chapter five explores how the records copied into the *Coventry Leet Book* reveal how civic power was negotiated between the ruling oligarchy, the Crown, and Coventry's citizens. Both chapters reveal the difficulties faced by traditional legal vocabularies to represent disorder and maintain control, resulting in increasingly risky attempts to manipulate language and re-signify meaning.

Chapter 1

Exemplifying Opprobrious Language in the *Alphabet Tales*

The Church's position on linguistic deviance was developed as a result of the consolidation of the discourse on sin which came about after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. As such, the classification of the sins of the tongue formed part of the Church's general policy of classifying and labelling deviant practices in order to render them controllable. At the same time, the use of exempla was also being encouraged as a means of extending lay knowledge of the faith. These short, instructional narratives reproduced doctrinal teaching in everyday settings, making it more accessible to the unlearned. Throughout the fourteenth century, exempla were increasingly produced in alphabetically-arranged compendia to supplement the Church's preaching drives and the training of parish priests.[1] These collections significantly extended the range of material available to medieval preachers, and provide insight into the kinds of topic that were most prominently addressed. The main source for this chapter is one such compendium: the fifteenth-century English translation of Arnold of Liège's *Alphabetum Narrationum*. The Latin text – which survives in nearly fifty manuscripts – was apparently extremely popular, being cited in preaching handbooks and sermons throughout England and Europe.[2] In contrast, the English translation is extant in only one fifteenth-century manuscript, British Library Additional MS 25719.[3]

No specific study of the *Alphabet* has been made, and the Latin text has yet to be edited. However, exempla and the rhetoric of exemplarity have been studied quite extensively in cultural and literary studies.[4] Most significant here is the work of

[1] On the impact of the Church's policies upon preaching and private confession in the fourteenth century, see Jeremy Catto, 'Currents of Religious Thought and Expression', in *The New Cambridge Medieval History. Vol. VI, c.1300-c.1415*, ed. Michael Jones, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 44-5.

[2] On the popularity of the *Alphabetum Narrationum*, see Joan Young Gregg, *Devils, Women and Jews: Reflections of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 10, and J.-Th. Welter, *L'Exemplum dans la littérature religieuse et didatique du Moyen Âge*, (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1973), pp. 304-19.

[3] The *Alphabet Tales* was written by the same scribe throughout, on paper, and with only basic rubrication. Although damaged in places, the general appearance of the manuscript is clean and plain. The manuscript was later bound with a Latin musical score written on vellum.

[4] A recent reassessment of the nature and function of exempla in medieval Europe is made by Jacques Berlioz and Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu, eds., *Les exempla médiévaux: nouvelles perspectives*, (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1998). For work on exemplary rhetoric and its literary implications, see

Edwin Craun and Larry Scanlon. Craun's work reconstructs pastoral discourse upon the sins of the tongue, stressing how particular types of language were classified and how these representations shaped the depiction of verbal deviance in fourteenth-century literature.[5] Scanlon's study is more secular, assessing the narrative forms of both 'public' and sermon exempla and their influence upon the work of Chaucerian writers.[6] Because both critics perceive exemplary rhetoric as a culturally dominant discourse unaffected by changing social conditions, neither submits exempla to extensive study beyond a generic examination. Instead, the hegemony that Craun and Scanlon highlight is attributed to the interpretative flexibility offered by the exemplum and the collections that contain them.[7] Such freedom is crucial because, as Scanlon argues, it asserts the constant 'capacity of clerical discourse to appropriate and redefine the lay'.[8]

Yet Scanlon's observation that the adaptation and revision of exempla was essential to their ongoing relevance requires greater emphasis if the full status of clerical discourse and its deviant alternatives are to be realised.[9] In particular, the origins of many of the motifs of exempla lie in folk tradition, making exempla an appropriation of traditional forms. Despite their reworking to suit doctrinal models, the coexistence of these alternative tales in popular culture upholds a more multivocal presentation than clerical discourse reveals. This chapter therefore argues that the integration of popular and clerical discourses is produced and maintained by conflict. Exempla are best understood not only as being a 'narrative enactment of cultural authority' but also as potential 'sites of contestation where authoritative voices and projects are challenged and break down'.[10] It is a position that is particularly pertinent

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Elizabeth Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truth in Later Middle English Literature*, (Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Alexander Gelley, *Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[5] Edwin Craun, '"Inordinata Locutio"': Blasphemy in Pastoral Literature, 1200-1500', *Traditio* 39 (1983), 135-62, and Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature: Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[6] Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[7] Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity*, p. 71; Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, p. 66.

[8] Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, p. 70.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 33-5.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 34; Francesca Canadé Sautman, Diana Conchada, and Giuseppe Carlo di Scipio, 'Introduction. Texts and Shadows: Frames, Narratives and Folklore', in *Telling Tales: Medieval Narratives and the Folk Tradition*, ed. Sautman, Conchada and di Scipio, (Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 13. On the conflict inspired by cultural clashes and integration, see Sarah

to the *Alphabet Tales* because, unlike other collections of exempla and treatises that include the same tales, the narratives are rarely concluded with moral recapitulations. This means that those exempla treating linguistic subjects can be examined independently for the way that their narrative motifs mediate deviant expression and advance clerical control. How these principles were applied can also be established by examining variations in the application of these exempla and their motifs. Thus approached, it is possible to view exempla in relation to the cultural climate that produced them rather than simply as traditional narrative forms.

An important additional consideration in the assessment of exempla on language is the impact of contemporary vernacular politics. Both David Lawton and Sarah Beckwith assert the influence of vernacular development upon the Church's policies and approach in the fifteenth century, but do not detail what this involved.[11] Their acceptance of the Church's programme of censorship as a defining influence upon linguistic attitudes is assessed and questioned here. It is argued that exempla that make language their subject impose a binary of good and bad language upon their audience that maintains exemplary discourse and facilitates the Church's suppression of deviant expression. Yet in doing so, the margins within which speculation about vernacular capacity could take place were also set.

Chapter one explores how attitudes about sinful language were forged, focusing particularly upon how exemplary motifs depicted opprobrious language and worked to discourage its use. It also questions the autonomy of the overseeing discourse used to articulate this teaching, and asks whether the narrative techniques employed to maintain it were jeopardised by the concerns of fifteenth-century vernacular politics. The first section explores how exemplary motifs in the *Alphabet Tales* represent linguistic issues. A comparative analysis will then be made with the homiletic treatise, *Jacob's Well*, to show how one fifteenth-century preacher used the *Alphabet*'s exempla to approach the problem of opprobrious language. Finally, these presentations will be considered against aspects of fifteenth-century vernacular

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Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 41.

[11] Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, and David Lawton *Blasphemy*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

politics in order to establish how these conditions impacted upon perceptions of language and the status of exemplary discourse.

1.1 Exemplary language and motifs

The motifs in exempla are crucial narrative components: they identify particular types of tales and their subjects, and they provide mnemonic images for those whom they are told to. It is partly because the narrative structure and thematic content of exempla are determined by the motifs that they use that it was possible for them to be collected and arranged in compendia. Yet although each type of exempla is recognisable by its motifs, the details and contexts of the narrative are variable, producing multiple versions. As such, exemplary motifs are more elaborate than the kinds of similes and metaphors typically used in treatises upon sin which make basic comparisons between the conduct of sinners and animals or objects.[12] Likewise, because motifs are often shared by exempla treating associated themes, they existed within an extensive interpretative domain which the Church was able to exploit to reinforce the cohesiveness of its teaching.

Motifs used to represent and expound the sins of the tongue are focused around the belief that words can have material consequences. One of the most popular treatises on sin which addresses the subject of linguistic deviance, the late fourteenth-century translation of the *Somme le Roi*, the *Book of Vices and Virtues*, explains how language achieves this effect:

> it falleþ ofte þat þe word is synne in hymself, for it is euele and so is synne, for it is of euele herte. And also it falleþ þat þe word is gret synne, for hit doþ gret harm þouȝ it be fair spoken and wel y-polissched and coloured.[13]

Although the words themselves may appear to be harmless, the malicious or defiant intentions of the speaker make them opprobrious. Many of the exempla that treat linguistic issues make the revelation of these deviant objectives their central concern. It is an approach that attempts to look beyond the form of language to establish the

[12] For instance, see chapter 42 of *Jacob's Well*, which illustrates the misconducts of the tongue with a series of popular similes and metaphors. *Jacob's Well*, ed. Arthur Brandeis, EETS o.s. 115 (1900).
[13] *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. W. N. Francis, EETS o.s. 217 (1968), pp. 54-5.

sinful source of deviant expression and the consequences of its use. In doing so, attention is shifted away from the deviant utterance itself and is refocused upon its causes and effects. These processes of reorientation are fundamental because they enable pastoral discourse to reinvest its authority. Furthermore, the choice of motif and narrative arrangement of exempla are informed by the same sources and philosophies that produced the discourse of the sins of the tongue: monastic cultures of silence, Augustinian arguments against lying, Pentateuchal stories about a vengeful God, and Aristotelian belief in language as a cognitive tool.[14] By impressing the continuity of these themes, pastoral discourse retains both the ability to counteract opprobrious language and its authority to do so. The following analysis therefore examines the nature of the motifs used in the *Alphabet* to represent opprobrious language, sacred words, and confession, in order to reconstruct the clerical mores that inform these representations.

1.1.1 Tales about opprobrious language

Due to the injunction of the second commandment, exempla on blasphemy were extremely prevalent.[15] Although the form of these exempla varies, what constitutes blasphemy is always the same: the speaker denies God's authority and in doing so asserts his individual superiority.[16] All four exempla included in the *Alphabet Tales* under the heading of 'blasfemia' illustrate the consequences that arise from defiant impulses. Although the motifs used to represent blasphemy are common to all exempla on opprobrious language, their relevance is clearly stated in the Latin headings to these tales: grave punishment (*grauiter puniter*) will be undertaken visibly and immediately (*visibiliter…statim*) upon the bodies (*corporaliter punitur*) of those who blaspheme. In accordance with Old Testament law, no allowance is made

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[14] Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity*, p. 23.

[15] Probably the most popular exempla on blasphemy were tales that illustrated the mutilation of Christ by those who swore *per membra* (on the body of Christ). See, for example, the versions included in the *Gesta Romanorum*, ed. Sidney J. H. Herrtage, EETS e.s. 33 (1962), p. 410; *Mirk's Festial: A Collection of Homilies*, ed. Theodore Erbe, part 1, EETS e.s. 96 (1905), pp. 113-4; and *Robert of Brunne's 'Handlyng Synne'*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, part 1, EETS o.s. 119, (1978; orig. pub. 1901), pp. 25-6.
The motif of the wounded Christ also appeared in stained glass and wall-paintings. For assessment of these tales and their visual representations as representations of masculine behaviour, see Sandy Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues: Speech and Gender in Late Medieval England*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), pp. 95-9.

[16] Craun, '"Inordinata Locutio"', 142.

for age, status or condition. Tale 115 is especially transparent in its fulfilment of this uncompromising imperative,[17] telling how a child who habitually blasphemed was chastised:

> So þe pestilence come & tuke it, so þat it burd dye. & when he had þe spottys þe fadur held hym vp in his armys; and þis childe saw wykkid spirittis com vnto hym-ward & said; "helpe fadur!" And when his fadur saw hym quake for drede, he askid hym what at he saw; & he ansswerd again & said, þat ill men come vnto hym & wolde take hym; & he began to blasfeme almyghti God, & with þatt he swelte. (82)

Although the child's infection with pestilence is not explicitly represented as part of his punishment, it is clear that it functions as a test of faith. Faced with the threat of having his soul taken by demons, the child fails to request the divine mercy that would save him and instead blames God for his condition. It is therefore made clear that the child's fate is the product of personal choice rather than having been predetermined. The tale's central purpose is to override individual impulses by providing stark warnings about the consequences of blasphemy. Consequently, the sudden death of swearers is the definitive motif of the *Alphabet*'s exempla on blasphemy.

However, the circumstances that occasion retribution are not only justifications for punishment but also specify to the audience what kinds of linguistic conduct are at issue. Tale 117 is illustrative, combining several images and themes to consolidate the motif. It tells the story of two friends preparing to eat a chicken for dinner. After carving the bird and seasoning it, one of the men proclaims:

> "Gossop, þou hase broken þis cokk so þat, & Saynt Petur wolde nevur so, it myght nevur com samen again." And the toder ansswerd hym again & sayd; "Not now, & Saynt Petir, bod also & Criste hym selfe wold command, þis Cokk sulde nevur ryse." And onone as he had sayd, þis cokk starte vpp with his fedurs on, & clappid samen hys wengis & krew; & þai mot se clefe in his fedurs all þe liquor at was putt on hym. & with þe sprenclyng of his wengis, þe peper & þe sauce light vppon bathe thies gosseps, & with þat þai wer streken with a

[17] For ease of reference, all exempla from the *Alphabet Tales* will be cited in the text according to their number in Mary MacLeod Banks' edition of the text. Page references cited in the text are also taken from this edition. *An Alphabet of Tales*, ed. M. M. Banks, 2 vols., EETS o.s. 126, 127 (1905).

leper whilk held þaim vnto þer lyvis end, & made ane end of þaim.
(83)

Unusually, the tale quotes the opprobrious language that inspires divine retribution. According to Craun, this is a particularly risky strategy because it offers the possibility for imitation and alternative interpretation: '*Exempla* of opprobrious language present a challenge to tellers' intent on the univocal, for they contain within them the words which deviate from the orthodox'.[18] Yet although the men's conversation invites audience identification, the speech is limited to the expression of the same kind of individual presumption witnessed in tale 115. By questioning the power of St Peter and Christ, it is the response to this arrogation of authority that assumes priority. Indeed, the events that follow are specifically structured to counteract any linguistic threat and prevent its reoccurrence. Firstly, the reformation of the cock disproves the men's theories about divine power. Then with God's transcendent ability confirmed, the leprosy that they are afflicted with becomes the means by which their inferiority is confirmed and made conspicuous.

Read as a complete narrative, tale 117 successfully diverts any linguistic issues that may have jeopardised its authority. However, the fact remains that opprobrious language cannot be addressed directly without endangering the autonomy of orthodox discourse. What takes place in these exempla is therefore not so much a contradiction as an appropriation of that power. The motifs used to exemplify opprobrious language consistently divert attention away from the words spoken to concentrate upon the effects that they inspire. It is a strategy that makes it possible to confront opprobrious language implicitly, and most often takes the form of a deflection of sinful impulses back upon the speaker's body. In doing so, deviant language is depicted as something material, denying it its labile capacity and therefore making it controllable. Moreover, in overlaying sinful language upon the body in the form of a wound or disease, it is the speaker rather than their words that becomes the focus. Sacrilegious speech may invite divine retribution, but it is the speaker's corruption by sin which is ultimately responsible. By making the punishment of the speaker a visible sign, the body becomes a mirror of the individual's spiritual

[18] Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity*, pp. 88, 93, and '"Inordinata Locutio"', pp. 135-7.

degradation.[19] The most popular form of this motif depicts punishments that reflect the exact nature of the words spoken.[20] Inversion is crucial here, revealing the true demeanour of the swearer whilst deflecting the power of the oaths. Consequently, these motifs are able to counteract the rebellious impulses behind deviant expression and reinstate the authority of pastoral discourse.

In the *Alphabet*'s tales on blasphemy, it is the mouth that is specified as the site of judgment. For instance, in tale 116, a covetous clerk who seizes control of a church in Burgundy from his enemies, scorns the words 'Qui se humiliate exaltabitur, et qui se exaltat humiliabitur' when he hears them during Mass. The response to his derision is immediate and fatal: 'furth-with a levennyng like a swerd went in at þe mouthe of hym þat spak, as he was spekand, & onone it killyd hym' (82-3). Tale 118 narrates a similar situation. A dice player who began to 'speke grete wurdis, & rauie & flite with God for þat he wan nott' is told to hold his tongue by his friend, but he continues blaspheming the name of God and Mary until he is interrupted by

> a voice aboue þaim þat sayd; 'I hafe suffred hedur-toward iniurie & wrong to be done vnto my selfe, bod I will nor may not suffer no langer þe iniuirie & wrong done vnto my moder.' And onone he þis att laste, as he lenyd opon þe tables, was sodanlie strekyn with a wown þat all men myght se, & bafid att his mouthe & swelte. (83-4)

The punishment of the mouths of both speakers makes a link between speech and its bodily source which denies the words' independent force. In addition, the fact that these fatal wounds were realised publicly, so 'þat all men myght se', proposes that the brutality conducted in the tale can occur in everyday life. The fear generated here is crucial to these tales' effectiveness, exploiting the audience's apprehension in order to

[19] The notion that linguistic restraint should be part of one's bodily conduct is also advanced by contemporary courtesy books. Their demands for silence and complete obeisance to the code represent a secular version of this exemplary discourse. For an overview of the nature of courtesy instruction, see Jonathon Nicholls, *The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet*, (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985). On courtesy texts and their social application in England and Europe, see Kathleen Ashley and Roy Clark, eds., *Medieval Conduct*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[20] In Frederic Tubach's index of exempla, there are at least ten different types of tale that depict blasphemers receiving punishments tailored to the words spoken. See F. C. Tubach, *Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales*, (Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, 1969), especially numbers 672-683. For other examples, see Gerald Robert Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, 2nd edn., (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), pp. 424-5, and Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity*, p. 99.

deter emulation of the speaker's language. Violence is a medium of suppression, and it is therefore unsurprising that the destruction of sinners' bodies is a common exemplary motif.[21] It is a method particularly suited to the containment of verbal deviance because it silences without using words, curtailing the opportunity for dialogue. The more gruesome the tale, the more fear is generated and the greater the imaginative hold that is exerted. With every successive performance the paralysis intensifies and the voicelessness of the subject is perpetuated.[22]

Using the body to manifest sin reveals that the Church's aim was not only to exemplify the consequences of deviance to the laity but to actively bring about their compliance at the same time. In addition to violence, submission is sometimes instilled through a more progressive form of materialisation where the speaker is disembodied – not in the sense of being reduced to being incorporeal, but in their total loss of individuality as their body is taken over for the purposes of exemplification. Unlike exempla where sinners are wounded or struck dead, these tales stress bodily separation or isolation, and always take place after the speaker's death. Because this fate usually results from loquacity or anger, the speakers are often identified as nuns, in reinforcement of antifeminist discourses.[23] However, although these tales may have been addressed to women, the motif itself is not overtly gendered in these versions.[24]

[21] See, for example, the tale of the usurer broken 'all to gobettis' by demons (tale 786), and the very grisly story of the devil's destruction of a dice-player's body, where only the bowels are left intact (tale 450).

[22] My notion of the suppression enabled by violent language is partly informed by Judith Butler's discussion of Toni Morrison's ideas about 'oppressive language'. See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 6-10.

[23] In this respect, these tales overlap with those which use the motifs of Tutivillus and other demons who record the idle chatter of parishioners, and particularly women, when in church. Because the various versions of these tales have been widely studied elsewhere, they are excluded from this analysis. For analysis of how women are depicted in these tales and their visual counterparts, see Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues*, pp. 52-8. On the possible historical origins and development of the tales of recording demons, see Brian Lee, '"This is no fable": Historical Residues in Two Medieval Exempla', *Speculum* 56 (1981), 728-60. For accounts of the particular development of Tutivillus, see Margaret Jennings, 'Tutivillus: The Literary Career of the Recording Demon', *Studies in Philology* 74 (1977), 1-96, and Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, pp. 513-14.

[24] Although Bardsley makes a useful point when she observes that swearing is traditionally associated with men while women are cast as chatterers, the fact that she does not consider the representations of other forms of speech produces an oversimplified model of gendered speech. The notion that it is only male swearing that constitutes speech acts is also not borne out by the exempla in the *Alphabet* such as tales 35 and 731, where the utterance of lies and angry words brings about retribution. Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues*, pp. 58-66, 95-9.

Tale 313 is ostensibly a tale about the perils of excommunication. It tells of how two nuns who refuse to amend their 'vnthrifti language' are cursed by their superior. When they die, they are unable to rest within the church when the words '"He þat is curste, go his ways!"' are pronounced until a novice prays for their souls. Bodies that are unable to rest in their graves because absolution was not sought are common but differ from this tale because they are concerned to emphasise the need to repent before death.[25] What tale 313 illustrates is how sinful language can impose the same kind of spiritual alienation as any other deviant practice. Excommunication is to be particularly avoided because in being constituted outside of the Church, one obtains a state of non-existence. Other tales expose how bodily division arises as a result of using such language. In tale 405, it is narrated how a nun who was chaste but 'so angrie þat whare at evur sho war sho made stryfe & debate', is punished after her death for her inability to 'restrene hur tong':

> on þe morn when folk come vnto þe kurk, þai saw reke come oute of hur grafe, & þai had mervell þer-of, & was ferd & opynde it, & keste oute þe erthe. & þai fande þe vpper halfe of hur bodie to hur navill burnyd clene away with fyre, & þe lawer partie lay hale, in betokynyng þat sho was a clene maydyn bod yit sho was passand angrie. (277)

The division of the body conducted here records the exact extent of the nun's vices and virtues, and is reinforced by the concluding explanation of the narrator. In a slightly different version of the story, tale 446 has the body of the nun cut in half upon the altar and burnt by demons, leaving 'þe prynte apon þe merbyll stonys, like as a woman had bene bodelie burnyd þer' (305). Like the sign of the smoke billowing from the grave, the scorch marks left upon the altar evidence the body's consumption by sin. Bodily absence is juxtaposed by the remnants of the corpse, emphasising how the use of opprobrious language fragments the body by producing errant identities. By relating the consequences of linguistic independence to speakers' bodies, comments can be made about their physical integration or estrangement in ways that can be quantified by the Church, and therefore controlled.[26] It is by continually reproducing

[25] On this theme, see tales 702 and 703 in the *Alphabet Tales*.
[26] On the representation of bodies in the medieval period, see Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin, eds., *Framing Medieval Bodies*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994).

opprobrious language within these limits and in physical forms that the motifs of these exempla can successfully enforce and uphold its marginalisation.

1.1.2 Tales about sacred words

The exemplification of sin was not a pursuit in itself, but a prelude to the exhortation to pursue repentance. It is therefore unsurprising that tales about sacred words reverse all of the motifs found in exempla on opprobrious language into positive signs. Whereas opprobrious language is ephemeral and diversionary in its power, its sacred counterpart displays a permanency and directness that extends beyond the words themselves. By speaking sacred words, individuals are able to maintain their individuality and are preserved by the same supernatural agencies that seek to destroy deviant speakers. Tale 735 exemplifies how protection is afforded by the pronunciation of 'De Profundis':

> Cantor Parisiencis tellis how on a tyme as a man went aboute þe kurk-garth sayand alway his De Profundis for all christen sawlis, so on a tyme þis mans enmys sewid after hym into þe same kurk-garth, & he fled thedir. And onone all þe dead men rase, and ilkone of þaim a spade in his hand, and manlelie þai defended hym and made his enmys so ferde at þai fled ichone. (492)

Living and dead are joined in a reciprocal relationship by these words, reinforcing the Church's teaching upon the importance of intercessory rituals for the dead. Indeed, the narrative's focused corroboration of the formula's power gives the impression that it is an exceptional account. However, the motif of the grateful dead is not unique to exempla. It has an extensive history in folktales, where dead men often return to aid the living.[27] Because versions of the motif exist in numerous traditions, it is probable that it was appropriated by clerical culture and incorporated into exempla as a way of penetrating popular beliefs. Utilised accordingly, the Church was able to exploit oral tradition and reshape it by introducing new meanings and narrative variations. As a

[27] For a list of these motifs and their origins, see Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*, (Helsinki: Academia Scientarum Fennica, 1964), pp. 171-5. It is probable, as Joan Gregg observes, that many exempla 'rest on a substratum of pagan and animistic culture'; *Devils, Women, and Jews*, p. 27 and *passim*.

result, those exempla which use traditional motifs are able to blend with existing versions, making their teaching appear as if part of a timeless and enduring wisdom.[28]

This authorising strategy is particularly valuable in exempla about sacred words because it permits their extraordinary properties to be understood in general terms. The motifs employed typically demonstrate the miraculous properties of these formulae. Whereas the substance of deviant words is constantly deflected in defiance of their permanency, sacred words obtain an innate materiality through fervent pious expression. One of the most prevalent motifs used here is that of the Ave Maria lily. It is the focus of tale 70, where it is used to highlight the importance of the feast of the annunciation. The tale relates how a monk who was unable to learn anything but the Ave became the subject of an amazing miracle:

> So at þe laste hym happynd to dye, & was berid with other monkis; and þer sprang oute of his grafe a fayr lelie, and on evur-ilk a lefe þeroff was wreten, Ave Maria, with golde letters. And þe monkis ran þerto & grufe down in his grafe to þai fande þe rute of þe lelie, & þai fand how it sprang furth of his mouthe. And be þat þai vnderstude þat he said þase ij wurdis, Ave Maria, with grete deuocion. And þerfor our ladie wold lat þaim hafe knowlege. (53)

Although derived from folktales,[29] the motif is fully fashioned here to reflect the centrality of Marian devotion.[30] Besides appearing as the Virgin's emblem of the lily, numerous other versions of the motif existed, depicting the Ave's manifestation in a range of forms under miraculous circumstances.[31] Of these variants, the main themes of an appearance in writing or the inscription upon the speaker's body are dominant.

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[28] For a comparable account of the way that reformers in sixteenth-century Germany manipulated popular culture and popular religion to convert the people, see Robert W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[29] According to Aarne and Thompson, the motif of reincarnation as a plant appears in versions of the Cinderella fairytale, where the heroine's dead mother returns to aid her; *The Types of the Folktale*, pp. 175-6. Further examples of the use of this motif in folktales are listed in Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, vol. 2, (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1966). For some examples of how this folk motif was deployed and modified in exempla, see Joan Young Gregg, 'The Exempla of *Jacob's Well*: A Study in the Transmission of Medieval Sermon Stories', *Traditio* 33 (1977), pp. 374-5.

[30] The motif of inscribing sacred words upon objects was a central image employed in both popular devotion and the structuring of contemplation. On the latter, see Emily J. Richards, 'Writing and Silence: Transitions between the Contemplative and the Active Life', in *Pieties in Transition: Religious Practices and Experiences, c. 1400-1640*, ed. Robert G. A. Lutton and Elisabeth E. Salter, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 163-79.

[31] See the variant tales listed in Tubach's *Index Exemplorum*, numbers 426-430, 2482, 2497, 4904.

Tale 70 stresses both of these aspects by locating the roots of the plant in the speaker's mouth, and indicating the words inscribed upon the leaves. As an etiological account of the Ave, it makes a clear connection between the sanctity of the formula and the benefits of its repetition. Moreover, in selecting the mouth for attention, the Ave becomes correlative to opprobrious language.

Other tales which emphasise the bodily manifestation of sacred words do so by stressing their organic nature. In reflection of the belief that speech is shaped by the will of the speaker rather than being innately sinful, the manifestation of sacred words takes place internally. Unlike sinful expression which must be revealed upon the body, sanctity is literally inscribed within. Tale 563 provides an explicit case in the example of St Ignatius:

> We rede in 'Legenda Beata Ignacij' þat when he was in dyvers grete turmentis, he wold neuer sease of calling of þe name of Cryste, & þe tormentors axkid hym whi he rehersyd þat name so ofte. And he ansswerd again & sayd; 'I hafe þat name written in my herte, & þerfor I may not sese fro calling þer-vppon'. And when he was dead, þai tuke his harte oute of his body, & cut it sonder be þe myddeste. And þai fand all his herte written within with þies namys, Iesus Christus, & all of letters of golde. And herefor many oon trusted in hym & was cristend. (378)

The fact that 'Jesus Christ' comes to be engraved upon St. Ignatius' heart indicates how these words are more powerful than the person who speaks them. It is a feature that challenges the individual presumption and rebellious impulses that underlie the articulation of opprobrious language. In contrast, the golden letters written within the pious speaker indicate their sanctity and worthiness to be inscribed by them. Thus these individuals also become mirrors of their conduct, but in ways that are to be marvelled at rather than deplored.

As the concluding statement of the exemplum makes evident, such model behaviour is not only individually beneficial but is also the foundation of Christian belief. 'Many oon trusted in hym' is the significant phrase here because it establishes the evidence as being beyond doubt. In other exempla, this unquestionable authority is asserted by the irrepressibility of the forces represented by sacred formulas: those who have faith in their powers are always rewarded, injustice is always avenged, and order

is always restored. Such unfailing justice is the subject of tale 454. A woman demands that a priest sleep with her, and when he refuses she accuses him of lechery and sorcery. He is condemned to be burnt to death, but manages to perform miracles during the ordeal because of his faith:

> when his ribbys was burnyd þat men myght se his longis, he began to syng 'Ave Maria', at all folke hard. And onone one of þe wommans cussyns putt a grete colle in his mouthe & said; 'I sall putt away þi prayers'. & with þat he worod hym; & his bonys wer berid in þe felde & did many grete meracles. And now vpon his grafe is þer made a wurthi kurk. (309)

The exposure of the man's lungs repeats the concern of other tales to make body parts pious emblems, but also stresses the transcendent power of the Ave by making special reference to how all of the spectators saw and heard the miracle. The efforts of the woman's cousin to obstruct his prayers are thwarted by the continuation of these phenomena, defying the kind of misconceived human intervention that would challenge divine will with material objects such as fire and coal. The tale is thus a prominent example of how exempla about sacred words are concerned to establish the properties of these formulae through a combination of prominent popular motifs and etiological invention. It is a combination that both underlines the centrality of these formulae in orthodox doctrine and exposes the Church's determination to extend and maintain its cultural significance.

1.1.3 Tales about confession

Together with the command that the laity receive more comprehensive religious instruction, the Fourth Lateran Council also insisted that each person received confession at least once a year.[32] This penitential scheme was reproduced in exempla, where the importance of contrition is stressed in order to overcome sin. Like sacred words, the depiction of the sacrament of confession is primarily concerned to assert its ability to neutralise all types of sinful behaviour. However, because confession brings about absolution, the motifs employed do not seek to materialise sin

[32] For a detailed account of the nature and development of confessional practices, see Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977).

in relation to the body in the way that tales treating linguistic issues do: when one's sins are acknowledged, they cease to be contained within the body, and therefore become immaterial. Tales that portray this invisible process do so by representing men's sins as written accounts which are erased by penitence. For instance, in tale 90, a demon shows St Augustine the book where men's sins are recorded, including the entry that he forgot to attend evensong once. Augustine immediately rectifies his error by going to the church and saying his prayers, and when he asks to see the entry again he discovers it has been erased: 'þis fend turnyd þis buke ouer & ouer & soght it, bod he cuth not fynde nothing bod a voyde place' (70). The motif used here is a literal representation of the 'book of deeds' which was purportedly compiled throughout each individual's life and evaluated at Judgment. By representing the relationship between sin and penance as one of writing and erasure, the corrective power of confession is made palpable.

However, the decision to focus upon the written word and its effacement also makes direct reference to the disempowerment of sinful language. According to Jack Goody, language in its written form differs most markedly from oral pronunciation because it changes the mode of reception: 'What writing does is to provide auditory information with a visual, and hence a spatial frame. In fact it changes the channel of communicated language from an auditory to a visual one'.[33] As a written artefact, sinful words gain tangible dimensions that divert attention away from their flexible oral form. With these boundaries established, it becomes possible to understand how confession disables sin. Two exempla in the *Alphabet Tales* which employ the motif of erasure devote particular attention to how sin is expunged. In tale 102, a woman who writes her sins in a bill and delivers it to St Basil endures an arduous route to forgiveness. Because St Basil is unable to expunge all of her sins, she is told to approach St Ephraim. When he is also incapable of pardoning her she returns to St Basil, only to find him dead. Her anguish is crucial to her final absolution:

> þan sho began to cry & said; 'all-myghti God deme betwixt þe & me;
> for when þou might hafe prayed for me, þou sent me vnto a noder'.
> And sho keste þis bill vpp[on] his bere, & with-in a while sho tuke it

[33] Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 186.

again & opynd it, and fande all hir syn clene done away oute þeroff.
(75-6)

Tale 205 recounts a similar situation, where a scholar at Paris who had committed 'many vglie syn' was unable to 'shrife hym of þaim for shame.' He approaches the Prior of St Victor's to request absolution, but is so overcome by remorse that he is forced to commit his sins to writing: 'þer was so mekull contricion in his harte, & so many sobbis in his breste, & so many syghyngis in his throte, & so many teris in his een, þat he mot not speke nor say a wurd'. When the Abbot is shown the bill, he finds 'nothing written þerin' (142). Repentance enables an act of dematerialisation to take place that contrasts the physical revelation of sin, illustrating in basic terms how deviance can be undone.

For Scanlon, the removal of the words that occurs in these tales is a consolidation of the authority of orthodox discourse. He argues that erasure echoes the way that declarations of wrongdoing in confession are supplanted by the sacramental formulas of absolution: the words 'cease to exist as action', having 'become entirely superseded by the now sanctified language which describes them'.[34] Yet in making erasure the central feature, Scanlon overlooks the importance of the confession's written form. In both of the exempla above, the sins are of an extremely serious nature. Making the words unspeakable highlights their gravity, and also avoids the potentially negative consequences of providing examples of sinful language. Fears about the attractiveness of sin are voiced by contemporary preaching handbooks which, whilst upholding the value of exempla as tools for teaching the laity, also counselled that any explicit details that might encourage transgression should be excluded.[35] The construction of tale 174 makes these concerns plain. A sinner among a group of pilgrims caught in a storm at sea admits that his offences have caused the tempest and requests that the party hears his confession. His fellow travellers agree, but are forced to endure

> so mekull horrible venom of syn at þaim irked to here hym. And onone as he had done, þurh þe mercie of almighti God þer fell a grete calme in þe see, & þe storm sesyd so sone at euere man had mervall þeroff. And

[34] Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, p. 78.
[35] Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, pp. 11-12.

> when þai come vnto þe havyn, almyghti God tuke oute of þer aller myndis all þase synys þat he had shrevyn hym off als verelie as þai had neuer harde tell of one of þaim. (121-2)

Sin is presented in its most malevolent and contaminating form here, making a strong case for the omission of details about the nature of the man's misdemeanours. Although erasure takes a different form with the pilgrims' memories being wiped, the potential dangers of retaining knowledge about sin are maintained. By stressing that the confession is too terrible to relate, the tale attempts to bring about the same kind of compliance that arises from the use of violence. In doing so, the authority of the preacher to make decisions about what the audience can hear is reinforced. Clerical discourse is thus able to validate these presentations whilst endorsing the principles upon which they are founded.

It is only by comparing exempla treating different linguistic subjects and concerns that the self-authorising strategy that they construct can be fully appreciated. The motifs of exempla about opprobrious language, sacred words, and confession both define their subject and interrelate, conveying the Church's teaching upon sin and fulfilling the overarching determination to normalise lay behaviour. All are concerned to assert the Church's normative language and standards whilst suppressing knowledge of deviant alternatives. Moreover, in being implemented and maintained by the Church, this binary relationship is self-perpetuating. By determining the status of language and actions as abject or sacred, material or immaterial, and external or internal, the Church's power to impose boundaries is constant. Even inside these limits, words are objectified to restrict alternative meanings and channel response, representing the constant need to shape interpretation. What the motifs of these exempla reveal is not what constitutes opprobrious language but what the Church intended should be thought about it. These tales are vehicles for the dissemination of clerical discourse, and in seeking to consolidate and legitimise it they become emblems of the institution that generated them.

1.2 Adapting and interpreting the *Alphabet Tales*: Some examples from *Jacob's Well*

The belief that exempla are univocal is a foundation of current studies of exemplary rhetoric. Critics like Craun and Scanlon have particularly viewed exempla as static, almost ahistorical, traditions. Indeed, signs of any modification or departure from clerical discourse are completely absent within exempla themselves. The English version of the *Alphabet Tales* is no exception; it is largely faithful to its Latin counterpart, with no apparent alterations as a result of its translation. Establishing the extent of the impact of the linguistic issues represented by this dominant discourse demands that we consider how it was used and interpreted. Some indication of the practical application of exempla can be gained by examining how they are arranged in collections and used in sermon cycles.[36] In particular, the ways that exempla are positioned and the meanings that are extracted from them afford insight into the compiler's perspectives and the way that they were transmitted. Such individualised approaches also make it possible to perceive emphases and preoccupations that might be related to wider social and cultural issues. Although these readings always affirm clerical discourse, their distinctive approaches indicate the multivocal backdrop to these exemplary narratives.

Determining how the exempla in the *Alphabet Tales* were used is facilitated by its distinctive design. Not only are they grouped by subject, but each group of exempla concludes with cross-references to other tales in the collection which illustrate corresponding themes. These references either make connections between like tales, or link stories about misconduct with those which advocate penitence. Preachers could therefore either select exempla around a particular sermon topic or make connections with other subjects in ways that were endlessly variable. Evidence that the collection was actually used in this way can be found in the sermon cycle *Jacob's Well*. Written in the first quarter of the fifteenth century by an anonymous author, the treatise is an extended sermon cycle developed around the metaphorical excavation of the soul from the bodily pit of sin.[37] As Gregg has observed, *Jacob's Well*'s doctrinal material is sourced from the *Speculum Vitae* while the tales are taken from the *Alphabetum Narrationum*. Gregg's observations that the *Alphabet*'s errors of

[36] For a comparable assessment of how some fourteenth-century collections may have been used, see Christina von Nolcken, 'Some Alphabetical Compendia and how Preachers used them in Fourteenth-Century England', *Viator* 12 (1981), 271-88.
[37] Only chapters 1-50 of 95 of *Jacob's Well* have been published from the single surviving manuscript, Salisbury Cathedral MS 103. Studies of the treatise have been limited. On the transmission of the tales, see Gregg, 'The Exempla of *Jacob's Well*'.

translation are absent in *Jacob's Well*, and that both texts employ different vocabularies and dialects, would appear to indicate that the author was not working from an English translation of the exempla collection.[38] However, because of the largely faithful rendering of the original Latin text in the English translation it is still possible to compare it with *Jacob's Well*.[39] A full study of the interrelations between these two texts is beyond the scope of this enquiry, but an assessment of the way that some of the tales concerning linguistic issues are deployed reveals important interpretative choices and variations.[40] The exempla are usually located at the end of the sermons, providing concluding illustrations to the doctrinal content of the sermon. Often arranged in multiples, the exempla selected both follow the suggested arrangements of the *Alphabet* and make innovative associations. Furthermore, the way that the tales are told also differs quite markedly in some cases from the versions in the *Alphabet*, making it possible to discern a personal perspective.

Of those tales treating opprobrious language, it is those concerning the talkativeness of nuns that are treated in most detail in *Jacob's Well*. All of the tales are coupled with similar narratives, and are incorporated into sermons upon the same subject. For instance, the exemplum of the cursed nuns is one of four tales that illustrate the sermon upon excommunication.[41] Likewise, the tale of the nun cut in half because of her loquaciousness appears in the sermon on idle words and thoughts, along with the tale of the demon who records the speech of those who chatter in church. Although using the same version of the tale as that given in the *Alphabet*, there is significantly more detail in the *Jacob's Well* rendition. The types of speech at fault and the fate of the nun are both recorded with greater attention:

> A nunne, chast of body but ydel in woordys, in iapys, & in foly speche, & dely3ted þerin, sche deyid, & was beryid in þe church. þe next ny3t after, þe kepere of þe church sey3 here be led wyth feendys

[38] *Ibid.*, pp. 360-2.

[39] Because a full study of the surviving manuscripts of the *Alphabetum* has yet to be made, it is impossible to know how much variation exists between the Latin texts. The correspondence of the English text to the Latin versions is established by Banks through comparison with BL MSS Harley 268 and Arundel 378.

[40] Another possible guide to the application and reception of this tales might be extracted from the annotations made in various hands throughout the manuscript of *Jacob's Well*. Contrastingly, the translation of the *Alphabet Tales* contains no marginal notes or underlining.

[41] *Jacob's Well*, ed. A. Brandeis, EETS o.s. 115 (1900), p.64. All subsequent references to *Jacob's Well* are from this edition and will be cited in the text.

> a-forn an awtere. þe feendys, wyth a brennyng sawe, kuttyn here in þe myddys, & þe ouer part of here þei brentyn fro þe wast vpward for here ydell woordys. þe nether parte fro þe wast dounward was hole, for sche was chast in body. And on þe morwe, on þe paument it was verryly sen where sche was brent. (232)

These specifics increase the impact and accessibility of the tale, and are isolated for comment in the concluding moralisation. Here the narrator makes sure that the audience identify with the nun's fate, as he exhorts: 'I drede me, þanne, ȝe þat arn ydell in word, thouȝt, & dede, schal be brent & sawyd wel werse þan sche was, but ȝe leuyn it' (233). In adding this moralised interpretation and interlinking it with the preceding tale, the distinctive voice of the preacher is securely aligned with his material in reinforcement of his interpretative agenda.

Fuelled by the guiding metaphor of the treatise, the preacher's rhetoric and method of exposition achieve an individual perspective that exceeds the model provided by his source text. In the *Alphabet Tales*, the alternative version of the previous exemplum – where the nun is cut in half because of her irate speech – is cross-referenced with the tale of the blaspheming dice-player. The author of *Jacob's Well* apparently followed the recommendation as both tales appear in his sermons on wrath, but he also exceeds this counsel by developing positive meanings that promote appropriate conduct. In the instance of the divided nun, the narrator concludes by challenging the audience to choose their fate: 'So wyth fyir schul þey in soule be brent þat in wretthe be vengeable. and þerfore caste out wretthe, & take þe grou[n]d of equyte, for þat helpyth þe soule!' (95). 'Equity' is a central term in the preacher's vocabulary, representing the even ground that should be sought as a haven from sin. Indeed, this concern is so prominent that in the exemplum of the blaspheming dice-player, equity is personified in the person of his fellow gamer. Their contrasting behaviour is particularly marked in the pair's language. Wrath is exposed when the dice-player begins to 'werwe & to curse, to swere & to lyen, to chyden & to defyen, & spake manye dyspitous woordys'; later, he confirms his crime, when instead of holding his tongue, he 'swore aȝen, & swore aȝen bonys & armys, & cursed, & werwyd' (100). In contrast,

> þat oþer man þat pleyid wyth him kepte equite in herte, tunge, & dede. he euenyd his herte fro malice, & his tunge fro angry woordys, & his

dedys fro wreche, & seyde to his felawe euenly: 'speke þou fayre! blaspheme noȝt þou þus þi god, & his modyr, & his seyntys, wyth suche horrible othys!' (100)

Structured in this way, the tale is no longer just a commentary about wayward individualism but explicitly differentiates good and bad conduct. Despite the traditional format of the distinction, its uncompromising narration indicates that a progressive attitude fuels the presentation. That opprobrious language is a particular preoccupation is indicated both by the detailed recounting of wrathful speech, and in the attention paid to exploring its many sinful guises in the rest of the treatise. Although not providing explicit examples of sinful speech, the author is clearly driven by a need to confront it directly. His adjustments to the exempla augment their specificity, stressing their purpose and enhancing the clarity of their expression. Such reinforcement is crucial to the achievement of the sermons' penitential aims, but where it is undertaken in relation to linguistic subjects, it also indicates a need to instil and preserve the rhetorical authority of these messages. By discussing language, the pressure placed upon the teller to justify their own expression becomes even greater. [42] Exemplary rhetoric's antithetical position towards other forms of expression may have prevailed as a dominant discourse, but what it masked was potentially a far more variable and unstable relationship.

1.3 Beyond the exemplar: Vernacular politics and cultural negotiation

If *Jacob's Well*'s flexible approach to the application of exemplary discourse exposes potential issues of linguistic authority, then it remains to be asked what they were and if they can be traced. Establishing what kinds of language were suppressed cannot be discerned from the artificial categories employed by the Church to describe them, but they do permit us to determine what it represented. As the examples from *Jacob's Well* show, the discourse that upholds these presentations is not as unified or impermeable as first appears. In particular, the fact that the motifs used by exempla do not possess fixed meanings opens up a grey area where they could exist as labile social symbols.[43] The flexibility of these motifs may enable cultural ascendancy when

[42] Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity*, p. 26.

[43] The notion that a 'grey area' of interpretation existed between orthodoxy and heterodoxy has been a theme of growing importance among scholars of Lollardy and lay piety, and is significant for general

used in conjunction with discourses like the sins of the tongue, but outside these limits their meaning may be far more unpredictable, as other interpretative models are applied. This situation is not only brought about after a sermon has been delivered, but is an inherent feature of exempla: their numerous versions and derivation from folktales means that they exist in multiple traditions which undermine the supremacy of the Church's rendering.[44] Although the sermon contexts of these tales provides the parameters within which they were intended to be understood, they do not curtail the capacity for reflection which can exceed these prescribed limits. Moreover, despite general adherence to these prevailing social values, individual adaptation of their teaching would always be undertaken to some extent in order to suit personal perspectives and expectations.[45] The adaptability of a motif was thus not so much a route to cultural supremacy as an opening for cultural negotiation.

Imaginative engagement was essential if the principles depicted in exempla were to be applied in everyday life, but such creative consideration also raised the potential for dissonant voices to arise.[46] In the Church's attempts to discourage deviation from its teaching, the body was an especially vital symbol. Used as a motif

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cultural studies as well as investigations of late medieval religion. See, for example, Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 23, 429; Shannon McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities, 1420-1530*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. 45; and John H. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005). All of these studies in some measure refute the homogeneity of orthodox belief and the monolithic status of the Church asserted by historians like Eamon Duffy; see Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1992).

[44] Although there is little evidence of how the laity responded to exempla, some insight can be gained from the few examples where exempla were copied into commonplace books. The commonplace book owned by Robert Reynes, compiled between about 1470 and 1482 in Acle, Norfolk, includes a version of the tale of the knight and the Ave Maria lily, and the final section of the fifteen tokens of the day of doom, which emphasises the wounds inflicted upon Christ by swearers. See Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, pp. 64-5, and Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 71-2. BL Harley MS 2251, a literary miscellany produced c.1460-1485, contains a different version of the exemplum of the knight and the Ave Maria lily (f. 71v), and also the exemplum of the man saved by the dead because he said De Profundis (f. 78r), as part of a series of exempla concerning Marian devotion. How these exempla are represented and personalised in these lay manuscripts is a subject for future study.

[45] For an account of how fifteenth-century theologians sought to incorporate lay interpretation, see James H. Landman, ''The Doom of Resoun': Accommodating Lay Interpretation in Late Medieval England', in *Medieval Crime and Social Control*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 90-123.

[46] Fiona Somerset has argued in 'Excitative Speech: Theories of Emotive Response form Richard Fitzralph to Margery Kempe', in *The Vernacular Spirit: Essays on Medieval Religious Literature*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Duncan Robertson, and Nancy Bradley Warren, (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 66, that the use of 'excitative speech' to inspire devotion could provoke dangerous reactions among audiences, including sedition, rebellion, and demands for the disendowment of the clergy. Unpredicted responses like these indicate why blasphemous language was suppressed in exempla.

in exempla, it encouraged individual identification at the same time as it imparted knowledge of the Church as a homogeneous institution derived from the body of Christ. Sarah Beckwith's study of the perception and representation of Christ's body in late medieval literature identifies its position as a central social image where clerical and lay interests competed and converged. In functioning to 'accommodate difference within unity', representations of the body sought to create wholeness from disparate parts.[47] Contrastingly, David Lawton argues that the bodily integrity of the Church was crucial to its definition of deviance, permitting it to isolate and eliminate divergent beliefs as blasphemous. Viewed accordingly, the exceptional status of groups who represent these beliefs arises because they fragment the body and sustain its disintegration through their interaction.[48] Lawton's reconstruction of how blasphemy is applied by the Church is particularly derived from the marginalisation of Jews and heretics; individual blasphemers of the kind represented in exempla do not figure in this construction. Their absence indicates how the Church could oscillate between images of the body to produce different emphases. Categorising deviance as a group belief enables comprehensive condemnation, whereas the isolation of individuals downplays their ability to command authority. It is a dichotomy that exemplifies the Church's power to set and reset the limits of inclusion and exclusion in the maintenance of its dominance.

Yet despite the constant hegemony of body images, their increased prominence in the fifteenth century indicates a change in social circumstances. An increasing sense of selfhood arising from confessional discourses contributed to the intensification of ideas about the body, but it was not so much individualism itself as the language used to articulate it that was critical. According to Beckwith and Lawton, the rise of a literary culture in the vernacular in the late-fourteenth century severely tested the Church's claims that Latin was the language of spiritual truth.[49] Contravening clerical discourse's claims to singularity, proponents of the vernacular argued for its common use by clergy and laypeople alike.[50] Such universality not only

[47] Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, pp. 27, 32.
[48] Lawton, *Blasphemy*, p. 96.
[49] Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, pp. 38-9; Lawton, *Blasphemy*, p. 103.
[50] On the association between Lollardy and the vernacular, see Anne Hudson's, 'Wyclif and the English Language', in *Wyclif in his Times*, ed. Anthony Kenny, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 85-103, and 'Lollardy: The English Heresy?', in Hudson, *Lollards and their Books*, (London and Ronceverte: The Hambledon Press, 1985), pp. 141-163.

eroded the Church's independence but in doing so exposed its underlying heterogeneity. By imposing the legislation of *De Heretico Comburendo* and Arundel's *Constitutions* in the first decade of the fifteenth century, the Church attempted to reinvest power in clerical discourse by appropriating the vernacular and distinguishing it from heterodox associations.[51] Lay book ownership and knowledge of the scriptures in English may not have been specifically forbidden by censorship, but they were frequently identified as signs of dissidence and feature prominently in heresy trials throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. In this respect, censorship succeeded in politicising the vernacular and its use, but the principle that English and Latin were polar opposites was not so straightforward in practice. The confiscation of orthodox vernacular texts, including the case of Reginald Pecock, whose attempts to use the vernacular to confront heresy resulted in the public burning of his books, indicates how the discrimination of orthodoxy from heterodoxy often involved false distinctions about the intentions behind vernacular use.[52] Indeed, the translation of the *Alphabet Tales* in the second-half of the fifteenth century shows that it was not necessarily English itself that was problematic, but what it might be made to represent and who possessed the authority to do so.[53]

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[51] Lawton argues that *De Heretico Comburendo* arose from fears about the implications of lay reading, but oddly does not mention the *Constitutions* as having a similar impact; *Blasphemy*, p. 109. For the alternative argument that it was Latin rather than English that was politicised by censorship, see Fiona Somerset, 'Expanding the Langlandian Canon: Radical Latin and the Stylistics of Reform', *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 17 (2003), 73-92. The most prominent example of vernacular appropriation by the Church can be seen in the production of Nicholas Love's *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, a translation of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* sanctioned by Archbishop Arundel. On Nicholas Love and the *Mirror*, see Richard Beadle, ''Devoute ymagynacioun' and the Dramatic Sense in Love's *Mirror* and the N-Town Plays', in *Nicholas Love at Waseda*, ed., Shoichi Oguro, Richard Beadle, and Michael G. Sargent, (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1997), pp. 1-17. On the use of the vernacular in mystical writing generally, see Nicholas Watson, 'Conceptions of the Mother Tongue: The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God', *New Medieval Literatures* 1, (1997), 85-124.

[52] The kinds of text considered suspect are discussed by Hudson in *The Premature Reformation*, pp. 264-8, 419-430. On the subject of Lollard book ownership more generally, see Hudson, *Lollards and their Books*. For analysis of the nature of book ownership in regional heretical groups, see McSheffrey, *Gender and* Heresy, pp. 70-2. The most comprehensive study of Reginald Pecock is provided by Wendy Scase in *English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, volume III, nos. 7-11, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996), pp. 75-146.

[53] McSheffrey particularly argues that in heresy trials, 'the language and even the contents of devotional material were less important than the ways in which they were read, spoken and understood'; 'Heresy, Orthodoxy and English Vernacular Religion, 1480-1525', *Past and Present* 186 (2005), p. 50. The impact of Arundel's *Constitutions* on vernacular sermon collections is noted by Helen Leith Spencer, causing an apparent dearth of production from the early fifteenth century until the 1470s and 1480s; *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 182-3.

As with the issues that arose from the reception of exempla, concerns about the deviant capacity of English are not addressed directly in popular preaching. Once censorship was initiated, no subsequent amendments were made in response to social and cultural circumstances. According to Nicholas Watson, the fact that literary production in the vernacular dramatically decreased is thus an indication of the success of censorship.[54] Yet in accepting this premise we also accept the illusion of the Church's univocal control. In rendering vernacular theology according to its binary of acceptable and unacceptable language, the Church was able to legally determine what its appropriate uses were. However, in establishing these limits, the Church also curtailed its own ability to adapt to the changing linguistic environment. Unable to imitate opprobrious language without undermining its distinctiveness, clerical discourse also could not maintain its authority without continually acknowledging its existence as an opposing force.[55] Distinguishing different types of belief was simply impossible as there was no language available to express them.[56] Consequently, a variety of beliefs that defied rigid classification flourished in the space created between these boundaries.[57] For instance, as John Arnold observes, cases of blasphemy were prevalent in the Middle Ages, yet many of the speakers

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[54] Nicholas Watson, 'Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409', *Speculum* 70 (1995), pp. 857-9.

[55] However, this is not to go as far as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in arguing that 'high' and 'low' culture are linked only by their attempts to maintain their singularity through processes of effacement and transgression; *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 3-5.

[56] An example of this situation can be seen in orthodox responses to Lollardy. Although able to mimic Lollard vocabulary and demonise alternative beliefs by associating them with sedition, the Church was unable to go beyond these limits. Whereas Lollardy could proclaim both its status as the true church and make its abjection a badge of honour, orthodoxy could only use opprobrious language to demonise other beliefs and not to empower itself. In Steven Justice's case study of the Norwich heresy trials, he argues that the retention of vernacular phrasing in the records reflects both a growing clerical interest in the nature of Lollard language and a desire to master it; 'Inquisition, Speech and Writing: A Case Study from Late Medieval Norwich', in *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages*, ed. Rita Copeland, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 302-4. An example of the way that opprobrious language was used to strengthen Lollard academic debate can be seen in *The Testimony of William Thorpe*, where the central intellectual dispute between Thorpe and Arundel frequently collapses as the Archbishop resorts to threats and abuse. Thorpe's *Testimony* is printed in *Two Wycliffite Texts*, ed. Anne Hudson, EETS o.s. 301 (1993). For analysis of the linguistic construction of the *Testimony*, see Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chap. 6; Rita Copeland, 'William Thorpe and his Lollard Community: Intellectual Labor and the Representation of Dissent', in *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 199-216.

[57] The kinds of belief that might fall outside of official parameters have been revealed in some fascinating studies, including Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, esp. chap. 6; Robert G. A. Lutton, *Lollardy and Orthodox Religion in Pre-Reformation England: Reconstructing Piety*, (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Royal Historical Society, 2006).

considered themselves to be orthodox.[58] Although swearing provoked by anger and frustration was distinguishable from that which expresses doubt about God, such discrimination could not be represented by exempla without complicating their message. Instead, these tales work upon the principle that 'blasphemy opens up a space of possibility for sceptical thought',[59] and seek to deny this capacity before orthodoxy could be challenged. Therefore, when treatises like *Jacob's Well* make especial reference to linguistic sins, this is probably the closest indication that we can seek to gain from clerical discourse that opprobrious language was becoming a more prevalent concern.

The inability of the Church to completely control its expression was essentially a product of its own making. Its attempts to harmonise lay beliefs are offset by the continual adjustments that were required to maintain its superiority. Even when clerical discourse was successfully delivered, the accuracy of its reception could not be guaranteed. For instance, the terror generated by tales depicting the violent punishment of sin could be so great that individuals eschewed the Church's protection and instead turned to magic to ward off God's vengeance.[60] Conversely, the depiction of the fearsome consequences of uttering opprobrious language might actually encourage its use by empowering its rebellious status. Moreover, the Church's inability to counter sinful expression upon its own terms compounds the potential for misunderstanding and contradiction.[61] In a climate where the status of the vernacular and those who used it were changing, it is probable that beliefs about language were increasingly established between the binary set by clerical discourse. As Robert Lutton has proposed:

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[58] For comparative studies of blasphemy in late medieval and early modern Europe, see Elizabeth Horodowich, 'Civic Identity and the Control of Blasphemy in Sixteenth-Century Venice', *Past and Present* 181 (2003), 3-33, and Maureen Flynn, 'Blasphemy and the Play of Anger in Sixteenth-Century Spain', *Past and Present* 149 (1995), 29-56.

[59] Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, pp. 220-1.

[60] Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, pp. 39-40.

[61] Besides objections to the subject of exempla and the manner of their depiction, total objection to the telling of tales was also a possibility. In Lollard opinion, the use of exempla was another means by which the Church denied them access to scriptural truth, making the tales a form of a deceptive language. Views of this kind are expressed in the *Lanterne of Liȝt*, ed. Lilian M. Swinburn, EETS o.s. 151 (1917), p. 55, and in the *Rosarium* under the heading of 'fabulacion'; *The Middle English Translation of the Rosarium Theologie*, ed. Christina von Nolcken, (Heidelburg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1979), pp. 73-4. Tale 315 in the *Alphabet* partially acknowledges these arguments in arguing for the value of using exempla in pastoral teaching, claiming that their use enabled the conversion of the whole of England.

> the most significant shifts in religious beliefs and practices prior to the Reformation may not have been experienced as conversions from orthodoxy to heresy but as processes or movements of transition and reconstruction for which there was no official vocabulary of articulation.[62]

Despite the inflexible appearance of clerical discourse, the increased attention paid to opprobrious language in fifteenth-century sermons indicates that its status was altering. The censorship of vernacular use points to a situation where the Church's linguistic authority was perceived to be unstable, not because its teachings were necessarily any less credible, but because the negotiation of power required to maintain them was more visible. Individuals who tested these limits with their language not only exposed the plurality of beliefs that underlay orthodoxy, but also revealed that the singularity of clerical discourse could not be maintained without continual conflict.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that although opprobrious language was a prominent religious concern in the fifteenth century, the anxieties expressed by exemplary rhetoric are indirect indicators of its true nature. The deviant status attributed by clerical discourse to sinful language represents an attempt to regulate and homogenise its dissident capacity, marginalising those speakers who would subvert the Church's authority. The ideological power of the design is upheld by the number of exempla produced to illustrate sinful speech and the cultural centrality of the motifs that they employ. Yet although these tales express a clear attitude towards opprobrious language in their representation of its different forms and consequences of use, they are unable to catalogue it fully without jeopardising the distinctiveness of clerical discourse. Exempla treating language are thus to some extent always remote from their subject. Indeed, as concerns about vernacular use became critical in the fifteenth century, the restrictions set by the Church may have enhanced the distance between clerical discourse and deviant voices. However, a far more fluid relationship underlies this artificial presentation, and may be discerned if we consider how the Church constructed and maintained its attitudes towards opprobrious language. Signs of

[62] Lutton, *Lollardy and Orthodox Religion*, p. 195.

adaptation, refashioning and accentuation in exempla indicate that negotiation was required to uphold linguistic authority. Flexibility in the deployment of exempla is thus evidence of an ongoing struggle for supremacy rather than a sign of unwavering control.

Conflict is particularly witnessed in relation to the vernacular because of its transitional status in the period. Censorship may have consolidated the Church's position against what it considered to be heretical uses of English, but the imprecision with which these laws were sometimes applied means that its success may simply have been an illusion.[63] The attention paid to designating opprobrious language and its effects particularly acknowledges that establishing control over new discourses and their users was an ongoing task. The processes by which authority was established and confirmed indicate that negotiation and adjustment were crucial. Although these practices predate the fifteenth century, the peculiar circumstances of this period are notable because they expose how clerical discourse had to adapt to the increasing divergence of lay beliefs. It is therefore a transitional setting, where dominant and evolving voices overlap and compete, that should be considered as the basis of vernacular development. The social changes that underlay censorship were central to the realisation of the laity's capacity to question and formulate beliefs, and in turn both generated concerns about the impact of opprobrious language and empowered its use. The following chapter examines how these concerns were depicted and exploited in moral lyrics treating opprobrious language.

[63] Spencer discusses the effectiveness of Arundel's *Constitutions* in *English Preaching*, pp. 163-88, noting that some of Arundel's injunctions were unclear, and that they achieved greater ideological than actual success – as is acknowledged by the survival of many Lollard texts and sermons.

Chapter 2

Moral Verses on Opprobrious Language and the Shaping of Popular Culture

Chapter two examines how the social and political dimensions of popular literacy led to the increased moralisation of language. Fifteenth-century moral verses on opprobrious language provide particularly pertinent examples of this process, both in their proliferation and increasingly specialised treatment of their subject. The popularisation of these verses indicates a general desire to reinforce social values in response to changing circumstances. Yet in addressing a more diverse audience, the linguistic capabilities of an expanding readership are also a source of prevailing insecurity. It is not only the instability caused by opprobrious language that is at issue, but also the incapacity of traditional moral discourse to counter it.

Criticism of moral verses has been limited, mainly due to three factors. Firstly, there is ongoing critical indecision about the vocabulary used to distinguish the verse forms of moral poetry, which includes ballads, carols, lyrics, and short proverbial verses.[1] Secondly, critical analysis has focused almost exclusively upon either courtly love lyrics or devotional poems and the religious contexts of their use. Rosemary Woolf's study of the genre remains pre-eminent, charting the shift from affective to aureate presentation in the religious lyric between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[2] As Siegfried Wenzel has observed, however, Woolf's definition of lyrics as religious poems excludes moral-didactic and complaint lyrics.[3] It is an oversight that raises a third issue: the classification of lyrics as minor literature. Because of their simplistic, repetitive design, lyrics have often been regarded as basic or even crude in their representation. Even when they are made the focus of study, the ephemeral nature of these poems means that their significance is often established through

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[1] See, for instance, A. C. Spearing's recent comments about the problem of defining lyrics in his *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 175-6, 185. The difficulties of deciphering the different kinds of poetry intended by contemporary terminology complicates matters further, as Julia Boffey observes in *Manuscripts of English Courtly Love Lyrics in the Later Middle Ages*, (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), p. 129.

[2] Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

[3] Siegfried Wenzel, *Verses in Sermons*: Fasciculus Morum *and its Middle English Poems*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Medieval Academy of America, 1978), pp. 124-5, and *Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 174.

association with the lengthier and more illustrious contents of the manuscripts that contain them.[4]

Appraisal of fifteenth-century lyrics has particularly been hampered by perceptions of their inadequacy. Indeed, much of the literature produced in the period is still compared unfavourably with that of the fourteenth century. Conclusions such as Seth Lerer's that fifteenth-century poetry was dominated by 'the voice of dullness and ineptitude, a voice conditioned by the literary system of a father Chaucer,' have, however, been the subject of recent reassessment by James Simpson, with the determination that such judgments are no longer satisfactory.[5] A more positive appreciation of the status of fifteenth-century writing is certainly necessary if we are to understand why opprobrious speech became such a significant subject in lyrics of this period. Likewise, although the refrains of many lyrics can be traced to early fourteenth-century sermons, later versions of these poems should not be considered simply as secondary developments. Instead, differences in the style and tone of these verses need to be privileged as important signs of cultural change which should not be eclipsed by generic considerations.

Evidence of such alteration is especially witnessed in moral lyrics upon opprobrious language, where individuals are cautioned to watch their language, tell the truth, or be silent. Their advice is consistent with teaching upon the sins of the tongue, but fifteenth-century examples differ markedly in style and tone from more traditional renditions of this teaching. To a greater extent than their fourteenth-century predecessors, the commentary of these lyrics is located within representations of their contemporary social milieu. They draw heavily upon proverbs to impart their message, thus drawing the teaching away from straightforward ecclesiastical affiliations. In making this transition, the wide-ranging catalogue of moral complaint is discarded in favour of a more penetrating address focused upon making language a

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[4] For instance, John Thompson claims in 'The Textual Background and Reputation of the Vernon Lyrics' in *Studies in the Vernon Manuscript*, ed. Derek Pearsall, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), pp. 223-4, that the status of the lyrics contained in the Vernon and Simeon manuscripts was enhanced by their compilation into these substantial volumes: 'the sheer physical presence of either one of these massive books in any medieval household (lay or religious) obviously also conferred its own authority on the many short vernacular items contained therein'.

[5] Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and his Readers*, as quoted by James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, Oxford English Literary History volume 2, 1350-1547, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 23.

distinct theme. As such, although these poems retain their religious identities, their proverbial messages become more overtly engaged with contemporary social and political conditions, producing an urgent, admonitory tone that cuts across social boundaries.

The shift from general address to detailed exposition has particular ramifications for the presentation of these lyrics. Because lyrics were initially developed for elite audiences, it is common to find traditional images from courtly literature, estates satire, and the Bible incorporated into them. Such associations are particularly marked in fourteenth-century lyrics, and are often emphasised by the nature of the other texts that accompany these poems. In contrast, although fifteenth-century lyrics still deploy these traditional elements, they address a broader audience. Their teaching is tailored to suit different social circumstances, altering the import of their customary settings and language. Moreover, the practice of reworking lyrics to suit different occasions and personal perspectives permitted ideas about linguistic potential to be explored beyond conventional limits. In the case of fifteenth-century examples, the use of established images and rhetoric could represent an attempt to restore stability or a means to subvert such norms. That this occurred in relation to ideas about opprobrious language indicates how these lyrics both addressed and expressed the voices of an expanding literate readership.

It is the nature of these conflicts as they are mediated in these lyrics that is the subject of this chapter. My use of the term 'moral verse' does not make a distinction between verse and poetry, but constitutes a generic category for the various types of moral poetry that treat the subject of opprobrious language. Rather than attempt to create artificial distinctions by selecting only one type of poetry for consideration, it is these verses' concerns with and approaches to opprobrious language within a shared moral culture that is of interest here. In order to identify why opprobrious language became such a concentrated moral concern, the first section explores its presentation in the late fourteenth-century lyrics of the Vernon manuscript. The second section examines the thematic development of these moral poems by considering how the subject of opprobrious language was particularised and popularised in fifteenth-century lyrics, carols and proverbial verses. As a final consideration, Lydgate's approach to language in his short moral poems will be assessed as evidence of the

underlying social instability that surrounded the subject of opprobrious language and its users.

2.1 Thematic development: The subject of opprobrious language in the Vernon lyrics

The Vernon manuscript is a significant repository of late fourteenth-century texts, including an extensive collection of short moral and devotional poetry. In assessing how perceptions of opprobrious language inflect some of these poems, their representation of the topic is located within an understanding of their manuscript context and contemporary political circumstances. The lyrics are strongly influenced by sermonic treatments of the subject, merging moral instruction with satirical observations about contemporary conditions.[6] Their approach to the subject is general rather than particular, and is concordant with the sins of the tongue and traditional complaint literature. By restricting their approach to the definition and suppression of opprobrious language, these poems confirm the conservative values of their elite audiences.

Probably produced between 1390 and 1400, the lyrics contained in the Vernon manuscript (Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Poet. a. 1) and its sister-volume, the Simeon manuscript (MS BL Add 2283), are composed in the traditional *balade* form of eight or twelve line stanzas where the final line is repeated as the refrain.[7] Despite the possibility that the lyrics were incorporated into the Vernon as 'an afterthought',[8] the probability that they circulated in booklets prior to their compilation indicates that they were both popular and topical.[9] As a group, the lyrics fall under the general

[6] As Richard Firth Green observes in 'John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature', in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 190, preachers often encouraged their audiences to make associations between contemporary social ills and the religious principles expounded by alluding to them in their sermons.

[7] Thompson, 'Textual Background', p. 202. On the development of the English ballad, see Albert B. Friedman, 'The Late Mediæval Ballade and the Origin of Broadside Balladry', *Medium Ævum* 27 (1958), 95-110.

[8] A. I. Doyle, 'The Shaping of the Vernon and Simeon Manuscripts', in Pearsall, *Studies*, p. 56.

[9] John Burrow argues in 'The Shape of the Vernon Refrain Lyrics', in Pearsall, *Studies*, p. 188, that contemporary references in some of these lyrics limit the extent of their prior circulation to a short history. However, the flexibility of these verses means that references to these events may have been inserted to produce a topical address. As Doyle observes in 'Shaping of the Vernon', p. 9, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which the Vernon scribe tailored the texts he copied, let alone how varied

theme of 'sowlehele', the title given to the volume before the table of contents. This salvific purpose was derived from Langland, and is reinforced by the inclusion of a copy of the A-text of *Piers Plowman* in the manuscript. More generally, the lyrics were inevitably read alongside the other religious and didactic texts in the manuscript, providing a general reading context.[10] None of the devotional material in the manuscript is concerned with advanced doctrinal issues or extensive mystical reflection, making it unlikely to have been intended for the use of a large religious institution, even though it was probably initially produced in this environment. Doyle surmises that 'the audience would almost certainly be secular and probably middle class', covering potential owners ranging from a community of nuns, to a high-status family concerned to possess a literary compendium that they could pass down to future generations.[11] The religious texts in the manuscript are orthodox and practical, evincing a concern to edify and advise the individual. Didactic intentions are especially manifested in the lyrics, which Thompson sees as offering 'little...positive encouragement for those individuals who wanted to go beyond carefully prescribed limits and dwell for any length of time in private meditative contemplation or explore their own strong mystical longings'.[12]

Those lyrics that refer to the ills of speaking opprobrious language are no exception. Of the twenty-seven lyrics contained in the Vernon and twenty-nine in the Simeon, very few are overly concerned with language. An exception is the lyric 'Always try to say the best', which outlines the teaching of the sins of the tongue

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their circulation may have been. In relation to the origins of these lyrics, see also Thompson's comments about the small anthologies that may have been used as exemplars by the Vernon scribe; Thompson, 'Textual Background', p. 222. On the nature of booklets and their role in the construction of manuscript anthologies, see P. R. Robinson, 'The 'Booklet': A Self-Contained Unit in Composite Manuscripts', *Codicologica* 3 (1980), 46-69; Ralph Hanna, 'Booklets in Medieval Manuscripts: Further Considerations', *Studies in Bibliography* 39 (1986), 100-11; and Julia Boffey and John J. Thompson, 'Anthologies and Miscellanies: Production and Choice of Texts', in *Book Production and Publishing in Britain, 1375-1475*, ed. Jeremy Griffiths and Derek A. Pearsall, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 291.

[10] Although Thompson notes in 'Textual Background', p. 203, that the present shape of the Vernon manuscript presents the lyrics in relation to spiritual texts such as Rolle's *Form of Living* and *Ego Dormio* in part V of the manuscript, there is no detailed investigation of how this may have influenced their reception as well as their compilation, or how they may have been read in conjunction with other material in the manuscript. For an overview of the contents of the Vernon manuscript, see N. F. Blake, 'Vernon Manuscript: Contents and Organisation', in Pearsall, *Studies*, pp. 45-9.

[11] Doyle, 'Shaping of the Vernon', pp. 57-8.

[12] Thompson, 'Textual Background', p. 202.

upon the effects of idle speech, slander and backbiting. Moderation of one's speech is the central message, with silence being the ultimate cure:

> Speke non yuel in no place,
> But kepe þi tonge and get þe a frend;
> Þat wikked word from þe nou pace,
> Hit is but tysyng of þe fend.[13] (9-12)

The poem consistently urges the audience to avoid slander and conduct that would incite defamation because these are sinful impulses. Its goal is to teach the individual to control their tongue in everyday situations through a series of examples and direct commands to reform their behaviour. As Burrow observes, the only connection between these injunctions are the refrain and the 'word' that it repeatedly stresses should always be borne in mind (3, 7, 55). Despite this loose thematic arrangement, it is probable that the lyric's precepts were either derived from sermons or that sermon rhetoric was employed here to encourage their observance. As the opening and concluding prayers to Mary further indicate, the principles imparted were a component in a broader programme of moral counsel rather than an independent topic. What the lyrics represent in the context of their Vernon sequence is a sustained attempt to support the general message of personal spiritual awareness through a straightforward programme of self-examination.

Informing the individual about linguistic immorality is thus a process of cumulative instruction. Shaping personal experience is a significant feature, and it is common to find the subject developed in relation to contemporary social ills. Following the format of 'abuses of the age' poetry, opprobrious language is depicted as a sign of society's moral degeneration, where no-one fears the consequences of their speech as they seek only to deceive and malign. 'Who says the sooth shall be shent' provides a detailed portrait of this environment, where the ability to tell the truth is continually suppressed by ambitious self-seekers:

> Þe Mon þat luste to liuen in ese,
> Or eny worschupe her to ateyne...
> He mot lerne to flatere and feyne;

[13] *The Minor Poems of the Vernon Manuscript*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, part II, EETS o.s. 117, (1901), p. 724. Unless otherwise stated, all references to poems from the Vernon manuscript are taken from this edition.

Herte & mouþ loke þei ben tweyne,
Þei mowe not ben of on assent;
And ȝit his tonge he mot restreyne,
For hos seiþ þe soþe, he schal be schent. (1-2, 8-12)

Although concerned with how flattery corrupts moral standards, it is the suppression of the truth rather than the language itself that is to blame. The implications of such dishonesty are devastating when viewed at the level of government:

Let a lord haue his Corlarie,
He schal wel knowe of al his dedes,
Þauȝ he be next his sacratarie;
Wiþ flaterynge his lord he fedes,
And with sum speche he most him tarie,
And þus with lesynges him he ledes;
To gabben his lord most him nedes,
And with sum blaundise make him blent, –
To leosen his offys euere he dredes,
For ȝif he þe soþe seiþ, he shcal be schent. (27-36)

Conventional criticism of corrupt advisors is recast here with the contention that an adviser cannot be anything but a sycophant when he is prevented from telling the truth. Honesty is overcome by flattering, lying, and gabbing, which although symptoms of the greater problem, also perpetuate it. The result is that words are deprived of their meaning, as 'vche mon makeþ touh and queynte;/ To leue þe tixt and take þe glose,/ Eueri word þei coloure and peynte' (14-6). Such emptiness threatens the potential irreversibility of all world-upside-down visions. Without any signs of impending change, any promise for the future is overcome by the contemporary nadir. In a world that 'was neuer so vntrewe' (62), the only certainty is the impending judgment of 'domes-day' (79).

There is little indication in the poem to suggest exactly which truths are being censored in this misleading environment. As Burrow notes, however, there is a reference in stanza five to an incident involving a Carmelite friar at the Salisbury parliament in 1384 which was reported in the *Westminster Chronicle*.[14] The event is not reported in the poem beyond the comment that it illustrates how preaching the truth had become insupportable in current times:

[14] Burrow, 'Shape of the Vernon', p. 188.

For let a frere in Godes seruise
Þe pereles to þe peple preche,
Of vre misdeed & vre queyntise,
Þe trewe tixt to telle and teche…
Þis pore prechour þei wolen apeche
At counseyl and at parliament. (49-52, 57-8)

Restrictions upon preaching had been imposed by the Council of London in 1382 to limit the spread of Wycliffite heresies. However, in doing so, the legislation also raised broader questions about what could be freely said, with the possibility that any form of social criticism might be seen as suspect. By suppressing religious counsel, the sinful practices that it would normally resolve are prolonged. Using the image of ingrained social disease common to complaint poetry, the poet denounces the ignorance responsible for this action and stresses its disastrous implications:

And al is wrong, þat dar I preue;
For let a mon be sore I-wounde,
Hou schulde a leche þis mon releeue,
But ʒif he miʒte ronsake þe wounde? (37-40)

If the Church were able to fulfil its spiritual duty, then society could be healed and the threat of permanent moral degeneration avoided. The poem is thus a call for reform that amplifies contemporary conditions in an attempt to prevent further escalation.

Despite the bleak description of linguistic failings, the fact that they can be rectified indicates that the reality of the situation is not quite as extreme as it appears. As with the recalcitrant individual who can always be saved if they are prepared to ask for mercy, these lyrics are not concerned so much with exposing the destabilising force of linguistic deviance as setting about its reformation. 'Charity is no longer cheer' is particularly illustrative. It is very similar to 'Who says the sooth shall be shent' in its lament for the loss of social benevolence. At the heart of this failing is a pernicious spiritual malaise brought about by envy, which has resulted in the proliferation of linguistic misdeed. Resolution can only be achieved if each individual is prepared to redress his wrongs, starting with the acknowledgment that good words are as easy to utter as bad ones:

Certes, and ȝe loke ariht,
A good word no more wol weye
Þat hit liþ on ȝor tonge as liht,
As þe worste þat ȝe con seye.
Such Idel wordes, I [ȝ]ou preye,
Ȝe louke hem faste in ȝoure forcere,
And let conscience bere þe keye. (105-11)

The contrast made here between idle words and sincere speech is central to many of the Vernon lyrics. Telling the truth is constantly advised as the only way to restore meaning to language. 'Truth ever is best' directly succeeds 'Charity is no longer cheer' in the manuscript, and provides a detailed account of how honesty can overcome all of the social ills described by its predecessor. Likewise, in the Simeon manuscript, there is an additional lyric which takes the opposite approach to 'Who says the sooth shall be shent' by commanding 'But thou say the sooth, thou shall be shent'. In asserting the primacy of telling the truth under any circumstances, the poem goes beyond the usual remit of merely informing its audience about the nature of opprobrious language and the implications of entertaining it:

Ȝif þou be þrat to take þe deth
For seyng soth, be not agast;
Let not þe soothe be set be-neth,
But truþe to mayntene, be ay studefast.[15] (49-52)

Although extreme in tone, the command highlights how the traditional moral values imparted by these lyrics were increasingly fused with satire to produce a penetrating contemporary address. Concerns about the suppression of the truth are a particular feature of satirical poems following *Piers Plowman*.[16] Yet as Anne Hudson has argued, many poems that appear to 'borrow' from *Piers* are in fact merely drawing upon far more extensive proverbial, anticlerical, or anti-intellectual traditions.[17]

What the Vernon lyrics represent then is not so much a particular perspective as the general principles of the culture from which they are derived. Although it is

[15] *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, ed. Carleton Brown, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924).
[16] On this subject, see Helen Barr, *Signes and Sothe: Language in the* Piers Plowman *Tradition*, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994).
[17] Although united under the theme of 'sowlehele', there is no evidence that the lyrics derive from *Piers*, meaning that any associations are left for the reader to develop. Anne Hudson, 'Epilogue: The Legacy of *Piers Plowman*' in *A Companion to* Piers Plowman, ed. J. A. Alford, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 253-4.

possible that the Vernon scribe may have modified the poems as he copied them, there is little evidence of a guiding principle in either their selection or arrangement to denote such concerted engagement. Immoral language is either figured within the boundaries of orthodox moral instruction, or is used as a basis for satirical comment upon social corruption. The exposition of linguistic forms is formal and largely unvarying, with the speaker being reminded of how they endanger their soul and disrupt society. As such, these lyrics concern themselves with bad language insomuch as it affects the following of an upright Christian life and not for its innate potential to disrupt or because the vernacular possesses any particular deviant identity. Likewise, although the social environment is treated as being exceptional in its moral degeneration, there is little evidence of it being anything more than a literary topos. The contrast between extremes may spell deterioration, but the preference for a general commentary of linguistic failings indicates that issues about language had yet to become critical.[18] Condemnation may be at the heart of these lyrics' reformist messages, but their criticism stops short of radicalism.

2.2 Thematic development: The particularisation and popularisation of fifteenth-century moral verses on opprobrious language

Fifteenth-century poems treating the immorality of opprobrious language differ most notably from their fourteenth-century counterparts in presenting language as an important topic in its own right. Lyrics were still produced within religious frames and with divine exhortations to speak well, but their focus upon the prevailing ills of opprobrious language in society take them beyond sermon associations to consider how language impacted upon everyday experiences. This is not to say that more conventional linguistic subjects derived from the sins of the tongue did not flourish in the period as well, but that their strongly didactic approach confined their expression to more traditional clerical interests.[19] In contrast, the development of a

[18] On the use of basic binary sequences in fourteenth-century complaint verses in sermons, see Wenzel, *Preachers*, pp. 175-82.

[19] See, for example, the lyric against swearing upon the Mass included in Richard Hill's commonplace book and Trinity College Cambridge MS 0.9.38 printed in *Songs, Carols and other Miscellaneous Poems, from the Balliol MS 354, Richard Hill's Commonplace Book*, ed. Roman Dyboski, EETS e.s. 101, (1907), pp. 42-3. Poems that develop the character of the word-collecting demon, Tutivillus, also represent a self-contained tradition; see 'Tutiuillus, þe deuyl of hell', in *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, ed. Carleton Brown, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 277, and the verses on Tutivillus inserted into BL MS Lansdowne 763 f. 58v.

strand of lyrics focused solely upon certain forms of language and its speakers suggests how issues relative to opprobrious language became a more significant social concern. It may alternatively be argued that the proliferation of these lyrics does not evidence the particularisation of their subject but instead simply indicates rising literacy levels. However, the fact that these verses were so widely diffused in a range of manuscript contexts and employed a specific rhetoric centred upon proverbial expression indicates the existence of shared concerns. This section therefore examines how fifteenth-century verses on opprobrious language assess its disruptive capacities and seek to construct a strongly defined moral code.

Some preliminary evidence that the reception of lyrics on opprobrious language was changing in the fifteenth century can be gained from an assessment of changes in the circulation of the Vernon lyrics. As Burrow has observed of the Vernon lyrics, their loose construction around the refrain motto and memorial transmission made them extremely flexible; consequently, versions of the lyrics in other manuscripts differ considerably in some cases. It is thus highly likely that, although versions of the Vernon lyrics were copied in the fifteenth century, they may not have been derived from this manuscript or the particular versions that it contains. The version of 'Always try to say the best' found in Princeton University Garrett MS 143 and BL Cotton Caligula MS A.ii contains ten stanzas whereas the Vernon/Simeon version contains seven. Of these stanzas, only three directly correspond. Similarly, the version of 'Who says the sooth shall be shent' contained in Trinity College Cambridge MS 0.9.38 appears without stanzas three and four of the Vernon/Simeon version and with stanzas five and six in reverse order.[20] The degree of alteration witnessed in these lyrics testifies to their malleable nature, where it was adaptability rather than the precedent of original versions that was prized. The possibility that the Vernon versions of lyrics were superseded by other versions in the fifteenth century means that the changes made to these lyrics might be important indications of changing attitudes towards their subject matter. Yet although Burrow and Thompson observe these alterations in their respective studies of the Vernon lyrics, they make

[20] Burrow, 'Shape of the Vernon', pp. 190, 193. For brief outlines of the contents and structure of Garrett MS 143 and Trinity College Cambridge MS 0.9.38 in relation to these verses, see Thompson, 'Textual Background', pp. 215, 221-2.

little comment about what they might reveal about changes in the mentalities behind these lyrics and their reception.

For many critics, the explosion of monitory writing in the fifteenth-century has been regarded as a cautious response to social and political fluctuations. Carol Meale's study of the transmission of the romance, *Ipomedon*, in fifteenth-century manuscripts identifies how it was compiled with texts that promoted courteous behaviour and upheld chivalric ideals. Based upon these arrangements, Meale posits that the manuscripts were read by readers of both middling and elite status, but with the general aim of reinforcing conservative social ideals.[21] Sheila Lindenbaum has likewise argued that the enthusiasm for conduct literature in the period was fuelled by the belief that the principles imparted by these texts promoted 'security and predictability in a world that violates these principles at every turn'.[22] The increased moralisation of language witnessed in popular poetry can be regarded as originating from the same impulses. By enforcing conventional mores through traditional tropes and topoi, the deviant subject could be normalised. However, although these poems promote traditional values, it is unclear whether audiences of different social status sought or applied them with the same motivations. With the broadening of their use beyond the clergy, the courtly style of fourteenth-century moral verses was eschewed for a more penetrating presentation. Articulated in an authoritative, admonitory tone, the resort to proverbial wisdom represents an attempt to displace emergent critical voices by reasserting the timeless principles of oral tradition. Yet although these verses claim to represent a static moral code, in making these changes they reveal that they are inseparable from the experimental linguistic milieu that influenced their production.

The link between the particularisation of opprobrious language as a subject in fifteenth-century moral verses and the expansion of their audience is made manifest in a number of contemporary carols. The majority of these carols were compiled in

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[21] Carol M. Meale, 'The Middle English Romance of *Ipomedon*: A Late Medieval 'Mirror' for Princes and Merchants', *Reading Medieval Studies* 10 (1984), 136-91.
[22] Sheila Lindenbaum, 'London Texts and Literate Practice', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 305.

monastic collections and were intended for public performance.[23] 'With pety movyd, I am constreyned' invites audience participation by introducing the burden with commands like 'with me to sing' and 'we syng and euermore saye', while 'Ther is non gres that growit on ground' speaks to its audience directly: 'Good men that stondyn and syttyn in this halle,/ I prey you, bothe on and alle,/ That wykkyd tunges fro you falle' (17-20). Rhetorical addresses like these encourage collective belief and are common in instructional literature. However, it might also be considered that the subject of linguistic deviance in the fifteenth century raised particular issues about audience conformity. Both carols treat evil speech as a source of social disruption, where silence is the best remedy. Whether the discord is between husband and wife or in international relations, the burden to 'Ther is non gras that growit on ground' advises 'Kep thi tunge, thi tunge, thi tunge;/ Thi wykyd tunge werkit me wo'. Other carols in the same collections are equally persistent in their admonition. The burden to 'Thi tunge is made of fleych and blod' warns: 'Man, bewar, bewar, bewar,/ And kepe the that thou haue no car'. Repetitive phrasing makes the carol memorable and lends force to its argument. Yet although these cautionary phrases were not new, their frequent reiteration in carols indicates that opprobrious language had become a more pervasive concern. Unlike previous depictions of the subject, there is no implicit social demarcation in the message or the language used to articulate it. The emphasis upon curbing opprobrious language in the carols belies the need for traditional moral teaching to retain its relevance in a climate of changing language use.

In their attempts to maintain the integrity of the moral values that they represent, fifteenth-century verses approach the subject of opprobrious language in ways that both demonise it and exploit its growing authority. Comments about the nature and effects of rumour provide a pertinent example. According to 'Thi tunge is made of fleych and blod', the implications of wicked speech extend beyond the speaker: 'Quan thou seyst thi euyl seying,/ Be it of eld, be it of yyng,/ Among many men thi speche may spring' (9-11). The ability for negative report to diversify is part of the power of opprobrious language, but here its transformation into rumour makes

[23] 'With pety movyd, I am constreyned' and 'Ittes knowyn in euery schyre' are part of Bodleian Library MS. Eng. Poet. e. I, a carol collection from the Benedictine monastery in Bury St Edmunds. 'Ther is non gres that growit on ground' and 'Thi tunge is made of fleych and blod' are contained in MS Sloane 2593, a carol collection from Beverley Minster, Yorkshire. R. L. Greene, ed., *The Early English Carols*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 206-7, 306, 318.

it an uncontrollable and self-destructive force. 'Seynt Bernard seiþ and so seye I' elaborates upon this presentation, equating the backbiter with the rumour-monger to make an association between slander and its dissemination:

> Whois mouþ is ful of yuel seiyng
> To schede oute blood þei haue swifte fete.
> For what is swifter rennyng
> Þan worde abrode whan it dooþ flete?[24] (25-8)

In an extension of the traditional topos of the backbiter as a slayer of souls, the malicious words spoken by the backbiter are highlighted as an independent and highly transmittable force. Yet the potential that any 'worde at onys may kille/ As many sowles as heriþ it' attaches such a frightening penalty to its expression that both speakers and hearers are encouraged to avoid entertaining it. Rumour's ability to disseminate news and foster common knowledge is not always perceived to be a deviant force, however. The carol 'Ittes knowyn in euery schyre' mimics the way that rumour unites opinion by passing its moral judgment off as the subject of widespread knowledge:

> Ittes knowyn in euery schyre
> Wekyd tongges haue no per...
> Ittes knowyn in euery lond
> Wekyd tongges don gret wrong. (1-2, 5-6)

Rather than attempt to form a common attitude towards opprobrious language among its audience, the carol treats the subject as one which is already being popularly discussed. If the damaging effects of a wicked tongue are 'knowyn in euery schyre' and 'euery lond', then the carol's aim is to promote moral reform by separating popular opinion from deviant voices. What makes these techniques significant is that they are not only concerned to denounce opprobrious language and its dissemination as a social problem; they also represent a concerted effort to *make* certain types of language a social concern.

[24] R. H. Bowers, 'A Middle-English Diatribe against Backbiting', *Modern Language Notes* 69 (1954), 160-3.

As the treatment of rumour indicates, what constitutes linguistic opprobrium is often not simply a question of the type of language used but where it is spoken and to whom. The concern to tackle the spread of opprobrious language above and beyond its identification indicates that opprobrious language was a very real concern in the fifteenth century. That the issues surrounding it had altered is evinced by the way that the proverbial teaching at the centre of these verses is framed by the topoi of other literary traditions, producing a more penetrating and specialised address. The conventions of *chanson d'aventure* lyrics were often used as narrative frames in late medieval poems, typically taking the form of a wandering narrator who makes a remarkable discovery or undertakes a quest.[25] In moral verses treating opprobrious language, this presentation provides a way to reproduce the authority of proverbial lore in a secular context. 'Ewyre say wylle, or hold the styll' opens with such a vision:

> As I stod in a ryalle haule,
> Where lordys and ladys were byd to syt,
> A loufly letter one a walle,
> A word of wysdome I sawe wryt;
> This word ys in my hert i-knyt;
> To lern this lessone who soo hath wylle,
> Where ewyre thou goo, stond, or sytt,
> Ewyre say wylle, or hold the style.[26] (1-8)

In an alternative scene to the courtly environment, 'Hyre and see and say not all' depicts the discovery of the text on an urban thoroughfare:

> Throwe a towne as y com ryde,
> Y saw wretyn on a wall
> A leffe of letterys long and wyde,
> 'Hyre and se and say not all'.[27] (1-4)

The location of the text may be imagined in both poems, but the narrator's succeeding exposition of its meaning gives the impression that it is available for all to see. Rather

[25] On the conventions of chanson d'aventure, see Helen E. Sandison, *The 'Chanson d'aventure' in Middle English*, (Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania: Bryn Mawr College, 1913), and Judith M. Davidoff, *Beginning Well: Framing Fictions in Late Middle English Poetry*, (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1988), esp. pp. 36-59.
[26] J. O. Halliwell, ed., *Early English Miscellanies in Prose and Verse*, (London: Warton Club, 1855), pp. 62-6.
[27] A. G. Rigg, 'An Edition of a Fifteenth-Century Commonplace Book (Trinity College, Cambridge, MS 0.9.38)', 2 vols., unpublished D Phil thesis, Oxford, 1966, pp. 48-50.

than just a traditional feature then, these narrative openings are concerned to overlay the proverbs with distinct origins so that their interpretation can be determined.

Moral verses were sometimes depicted in wall paintings and engraved upon objects,[28] but the centrality of the textual image in these poems indicates a more pointed significance. One of the consequences of the expansion of literacy during the fifteenth century was that text was increasingly incorporated into public displays ranging from pageants to ritual punishments. That a general audience was envisaged for these spectacles is indicated by the number of proclamations and seditious bills produced during the period to influence popular opinion.[29] Although the ability to read was by no means widespread, as Margaret Aston has argued, if one person read a text aloud, then it could be quickly disseminated among a wide audience.[30] However, the transmission of material by word of mouth often caused unauthorised accounts to circulate. 'Hyre and see and say not all' observes this potential in drawing attention to the prevalence of rumour again:

> Certyn thys ys a wonder thing:
> Be a tale never so fals,
> Meny men haue grete lekyng
> To tell it forthe and eche it als. (29-32)

The depiction of the poems' proverbs as public signs attempts to restrict the potential for misrepresentation by stressing the materiality of the words over the transitory nature of hearsay. 'Ewyre say well, or hold the styll' consolidates the attempt to curb wayward impulses by calling the audience to consider their linguistic immorality in light of its ultimate rather than immediate ramifications:

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[28] The practice continued well into the sixteenth century. Adam Fox observes in *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 146-9, that it was common in the period 1500-1700 for proverbs and moral sentences to be painted upon walls as an aid to memory and reflection. In *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 3, Arthur F. Marotti likewise notes the variety of places upon which occasional lyrics could be recorded in the sixteenth century, including rings, food trenchers, windows, paintings, tombstones, monuments, and trees.

[29] Margaret Aston stresses the visual impact of publicly-posted bills as being as significant as their contents, indicating that 'important matters should be seen as well as heard'; 'Devotional Literacy', in Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion*, (London: Hambledon Press, 1984), p. 106. On the practice of bill-casting, see Wendy Scase, 'Strange and Wonderful Bills': Bill-Casting and Political Discourse in Late Medieval England', *New Medieval Literatures* 2, (1998), 225-247.

[30] Margaret Aston, 'Lollardy and Literacy', in *Lollards and Reformers*, p. 194.

Off every ydylle word that thou hast spoke,
Les and more hole and brook,
Thay schalle be wryttyne in a bylle...
At domys-day when God schalt syt...
With speche we schalle be damnd or quyt. (52-4, 65, 67)

It may be a commonplace that one's sins are recorded for judgment, but the fact that these are specifically linguistic sins provides a direct link between the initial written monitory proverb and the corresponding text of each individual sinner. By rendering this advice as something written rather than spoken, the poem challenges the insubstantiality of idle language and makes it a controllable force.

The need to make opprobrious language manageable and curb its destabilising effects produced a concentration of the traditional moral principles promoted to curb misconduct. The counsel proposed by verses on opprobrious language compliments the principles of courtesy instruction, as the poem 'Hit falleth for euery gentilman' illustrates: 'It is þe properte of A gentilmann/ To say the beste þat he cann' (14-5).[31] In their respective analyses of this moral literature, Frederick Furnivall and A. G. Rigg highlight the reference to the teaching of the wise man in 'Whate-ever thow sey, a-vyse the welle!' as an indication of intertextual borrowing from the courtesy text, *How the Wiseman taught his Son*:

The wyse man hath hys sone y-tawtȝtte
yn ryches, poorte, woo, and welle
Thys worthy reson for-ȝete thow noȝt,
What euer thow sey, A-vyse the welle![32] (53-6)

However, beyond the coincidental use of the phrase, there is no indication of direct borrowing from either text, and there is no extant evidence that they were ever compiled together. Indeed, courtesy texts and lyrics on opprobrious language are

[31] *Early English Meals and Manners*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS o.s. 32 (1868), pp. 219-20.
[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 244-6; A. G. Rigg, *A Glastonbury Miscellany of the Fifteenth Century: A Descriptive Index of Trinity College, Cambridge, MS 0.9.38*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 57, 73. Rigg's notes to the poem in his D. Phil thesis, 'A Fifteenth-Century Commonplace Book', vol. 2, p. 325, also link the poem to other courtesy texts, including the *Boke of Nurture*, *The Young Children's Book* and *The Babees' Book*.

generally not found in the same manuscripts.[33] Yet it should not be presumed upon this basis that issues of religious morality and secular deportment were necessarily separate interests. Lyrics on opprobrious language often appear in manuscripts containing a range of instructional and practical texts which permit the advice to be considered in different ways. What makes these arrangements distinctive in the fifteenth century is that the lyrics anticipate and encourage these associations by employing common didactic references. An understanding of the nature and application of this vocabulary across different types of instructional texts offers important cultural insights. In relation to lyrics on opprobrious language, the focused use of monitory language in fifteenth-century versions is relative to the specialisation of the poems' subject. References to the 'wise man' function in precisely the same way as the citation of named authorities in proverbs, anchoring the advice and asserting its authority.[34] Considered in this way, the distillation of moral vocabulary that is witnessed in these poems represents the need for a vital overseeing discourse to resist the influence of deviant expression.

At the centre of this design are the proverbial refrains. Their position and repetition in the poems naturally make them significant, but the choice of maxims is especially revealing of how the issue of opprobrious language was perceived and approached. Proverbs were a significant component of medieval culture, being used to provide instruction in the art of rhetoric, teach grammar to schoolchildren, and offer memorable guidance in sermons.[35] Proverbial lore is often most enduring in oral societies, where it functions as a vital expression of communal values and customary behaviour. However, as Cameron Louis points out, even though proverbs were largely derived from folk material, contemporaries only placed importance upon learned

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[33] The only significant exception that I have found is BL Cotton Caligula MS A.ii, a professionally-produced household book containing the courtesy texts *Urbanitatis* and Lydgate's *Stans puer ad mensam* with the lyric 'Always try to say the best'. Both courtesy texts are positioned in proximity to romances, while the lyric is situated in a series of short, moral poems.

[34] The carol 'Be mery, & suffer, as I the vise' also refers to the wise man when presenting and authorising its teaching: 'the wise man tawght both old & yonge,/ who can suffer & hold his tonge,/ he may be merry, & no-thyng woo' (19-22); *Carols*, no. 345, p. 209. Lyrics that claim their wisdom is derived from a named authority include 'Seynt Bernard seiþ and so seye I' and 'He is a fole eke as seneke seythe'. The latter lyric has not been edited and survives uniquely in BL Harley MS 374 (f. 22r), a collection of the correspondence of the sixteenth-century antiquarian John Stow.

[35] On the teaching of grammar in the Middle Ages, see Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Schools from Roman Britain to Renaissance England*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 86-127. On the uses of proverbs in the early modern period, see Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, chap. 2.

authorities.[36] Thus, the attribution of proverbs to scholarly figures attempts to place them within an erudite rather than popular tradition. By basing their arguments upon proverbs, moral verses deter the use of opprobrious language by casting it as the antithesis of these fundamental principles. Yet despite the apparent straightforwardness of this construction, as James Obelkevich argues, it is often difficult to distinguish how proverbs integrate social values from the way that they enforce them.[37] Despite their indication of ingrained social beliefs, the precise meaning of proverbs is unfixed, being determined by the context within which they are applied and the subtexts that are woven into them.[38] Although proverbs are central to lyrics on opprobrious language, they do not speak for themselves but are instead integrated into clerical discourse to authorise its teaching. In 'Hyre and see and say not all', a vigorous interpretative rhetoric commonly used in religious complaint asserts the overriding authority of the narrator's interpretation: 'yff thow wolde thys lesson lere' (5), 'Y rede yow' (51), 'y the saye' (53), and 'therfor y rede' (67). Thus, the idea of a tradition of moral values becomes a cover for the cultural fashioning undertaken by these poems. By claiming to reinstate general standards about what should and should not be said, the growing authority of opprobrious language and its users is effectively downplayed.

As Siegfried Wenzel has revealed in his study of verses in sermons, the use of proverbs to support and express clerical discourse was by no means new.[39] Nevertheless, the traceability of these verses does not necessarily indicate that they are 'original' versions. Although preaching tags may have inspired verses to be written around them, they also continued to circulate concurrently with these poems in ways that defy straightforward thematic classification. Additions and alterations like these are important indicators of how moral advice was modified to suit changing circumstances, providing evidence of a governing principle beyond the continuous re-rehearsal of a standard idea. Such development is displayed in relation to the proverb 'ȝif þou wys be wil'. It is recorded in the fourteenth-century preaching book of John

[36] Cameron Louis, 'Proverbs, Precepts, and Monitory Pieces', in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*, vol. 9, gen. ed., A. E. Hartung, (New Haven, Connecticut: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1993), p. 2960.
[37] James Obelkevich, 'Proverbs and Social History', in *The Social History of Language*, ed. Roy Porter and Peter Burke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 47.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 48.
[39] Wenzel, *Preachers*, pp. 174-208.

of Grimestone, where it appears under the heading of 'de sapientia' and is succeeded by its rendering in Latin:

> ȝif þu wis wor þe wel,
> þese sex kep wich I þe kenne:
> Wat þu seyst, wam til,
> Of wam, and wy, wer, an wane.
> Si sapiens fore vis, sex serua, que tibi mando:
> Quid vel vbi loqueris, de quo, cui, quomodo quando.[40]

The proverb is also recorded at the beginning of the exposition of the sins of the tongue in the English translation of the *Vices and Virtues*, but does not appear in the original French.[41] By introducing the proverb into the treatise, the translator not only shows how it was applied in preaching material but also indicates its contemporary prominence within such teaching. A different application is witnessed in the proverb's incorporation into the fifteenth-century lyric 'Whate-ever thow sey, a-veyse the well!':

> yf that thow wolte speke A-ryȝt,
> Ssyx thynggs thow moste obseue then:
> What thow spekyst, & of what wyȝt,
> Whare, to whom, whye, and whenne.[42] (59-60)

The proverb appears here divorced from its sermon presentations, having been incorporated into an independent lyric forged around the subject of opprobrious language. Moreover, although the poem survives in a manuscript related to Glastonbury Abbey, the fact that Trinity College, Cambridge, MS 0.9.38 is a literary miscellany proposes a more secular than religious application.[43] It is a transition that represents both the changing significance of language and the position of the moral code used to represent it. Whereas the use of proverbs was previously limited to their representation within clerical discourse, their separation from strict preaching contexts and incorporation into fifteenth-century moral lyrics indicates a more diverse

[40] *A Descriptive Index of the English Lyrics in John of Grimestone's Preaching Book*, ed. E. Wilson, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973).
[41] *Book of Vices and Virtues*, pp. lxii, 54.
[42] Furnivall, *Meals and Manners*, pp. 244-6.
[43] For further comments upon this manuscript, see below. A full account of the manuscript's arrangement and compilation, and edition of its contents, is given by Rigg in 'Edition of a Fifteenth Century Commonplace Book'.

application. No longer just a mnemonic aid, the popularisation of these proverbs in relation to opprobrious language encourages the subject to be regarded as a more immediate and significant problem.

In addition, it is apparent that the traditional monitory language used to expound proverbs was being reworked in accordance with the changing social environment. The increasingly frequent application of the command 'avyse the well' provides an example of this process. The phrase is commonly found in fifteenth-century courtesy literature where it is used to urge conformity to the texts' social principles,[44] and occurs throughout moral verses. Its application is prominent in relation to the directive to keep one's tongue, especially in the carol 'Whatsoeuer ye thynk, avyse ye wele'[45] and the lyric 'What-ever thow sey, avyse thee welle!' where the phrase is repeated as the concluding line in every stanza. Such insistent reiteration is frequently accompanied by warnings to 'take hede' and 'beware', which transform the import of the traditional complaints about watching one's speech. Consistent in their avowal of the lack of sincerity in contemporary society and its pervasive effects, these verses go beyond the vision of suppressed truth-telling represented in the Vernon manuscript's 'Who says the sooth shall be shent'. According to 'What-ever thow sey, a-vyse the welle!', deceitful tongues are not only a personal concern but are responsible for great social disorder and disturbance:

> Dysese, wharre, sorowe and debate,
> ys caused ofte by venemys tonge;
> ...
> yf euery man had thys word yn thowȝt
> Meny thynggis had neuer be by-gunne
> That ofte yn Ingelond hath be y-wroȝt. (41-2, 50-2)

'Ewyre say wylle, or hold the stylle' upholds a similar argument when it laments that 'speche was never soo well aspayd,/ Nor never soo monné lyvis i-lore,/ Throw wordys that hath byn myssayd' (10-2). Claims that immorality had reached an unprecedented level may appear to be just typical exaggerations heard during times of

[44] See, for instance, *Urbanitatis* (line 90), *The Young Children's Book* (line 84) in Furnivall, *Meals and Manners*, and Caxton's *Book of Courtesy* (line 144), in *Caxton's Book of Curtesye*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS e.s. 3 (1868).
[45] *Carols* no. 343, p. 208. Fading on the left-hand side of the manuscript prevents this carol from taking its title from the first line.

unrest, but in their recurrence and urgent expression, they point to a far more sinister evaluation of linguistic politics.

It is especially noticeable that claims about the destabilising effects of opprobrious language centre upon slander. In the carol 'Ittes knowyn in euery schyre', the reproof voiced by slanderers is transformed into a judgment upon the contradictoriness of society:

> Yf a man go in clotes gay,
> Or elles in gud array,
> Wekyd tongges yet wyl say,
> 'Wer cam the by therto?'
>
> Yyf a man go in cloys ill
> And haue not the world at wyl,
> Wekyd tongges thei wyll hym spyll
> And sey, 'He ys a stake; lat hym goo'. (9-16)

The failure to distinguish good and bad conduct proposes a situation where defamatory voices not only collapse traditional social standards but threaten to undermine them altogether. Responding to these serious conditions, the carol 'Be mery, & suffer, as I the vise' offers the desperate advice that vigilance and self-restraint are the only possible remedies: 'Beware to whom thou speke thy will,/ For thy speche may greve the yll;/ here & see, & goo than still' (1-3).[46] Many of the lyrics share the suspicion and distrust voiced here. That they can only advise caution indicates that telling the truth was no longer the sole issue; saying anything in the wrong environment was now potentially dangerous. Under the influence of a transformed social context, language itself had become an unstable entity. Consequently, although these lyrics decry the suppression of free speech, their anxieties about linguistic potential are never entirely absent.

Perhaps ironically, these concerns about the flexibility of language arise particularly in relation to the lyrics' popularisation. Although the lyrics' moral teaching purports to represent common values, the need for their reinforcement indicates how changes in the status of language were associated with shifting social

[46] *Carols* no. 345, p. 209.

boundaries and the tensions thus aroused. Indeed, although the wide circulation of moral verses on opprobrious language reveals that the sentiments they expressed were accepted by their readers, the poems' concerns are in part about the linguistic capacities of an extended readership. In order to remain relevant, the moral code represented by these verses relied upon its reproducibility. For instance, one of the most frequent themes in the command to remain watchful is the advice to be wary of one's neighbours, resulting in the repetition of certain words and formulas. In 'Ewyre say wylle, or hold the stylle', it is advised that

> Att churche, at chepyng, or at nale,
> Awyse the welle who syttys the by,
> Lest he wylle repport thi talle,
> And dissclaundure the after to gret and smalle. (26-9)

Likewise, 'A leson to kepe well þe tonge' suggests that one should 'avise the well, who stondythe the be syde' (f. 6v), while 'Whate-ever thow sey, avyse thee welle' recommends 'A-vyse the, man yn whate place and whare/ A word of conseyl thow doyst seyne' (9-10). All three lyrics are linked by their repetition of the phrase 'avise the' and their specification of the locations and contexts where this applies. Overlaps like these reinforce the moral code and encourage memorisation of its principles. Yet each lyric also locates the material differently, displaying the constant reinvention necessary to produce an independent approach and maintain the relevance of the teaching. The problem here is that such adaptation is not restricted to the clerical culture that produces these lyrics; the growth of literacy also meant that more readers were able to reconstruct and reinterpret the texts that they read.

Because lyrics on opprobrious language derive from a broader moral culture, it was customary for them to be disseminated in a variety of forms, ranging from whole verses to single stanzas. However, it is clear that in the fifteenth century the diversity of these forms increased as a consequence of the lyrics' expanded readership.[47] Not only were more people able to read and buy books, but manuscripts also became smaller and more portable, reflecting the reading habits and preoccupations of these

[47] For examples of the circulation of proverbial verses and fragments, see Bodleian Library MS 21626 f. 31v, a rhyming couplet against hasty speech including the phrase 'avyse the well', and BL Cotton Titus MS A.xxvi f.143r, which records the first four lines of the poem 'Whate-ever thow say a-vyse the welle!' as found in Trinity College Cambridge MS 0.9.38.

readers.[48] Although the number of extant fifteenth-century lyrics on opprobrious language is mainly a reflection of the growing lay audience, there is some evidence that these lyrics were specifically selected. Trinity College, Cambridge, MS 0.9.38, a holster-sized literary miscellany initially used as an account book by Glastonbury abbey, includes three refrain lyrics on opprobrious language. 'Who seyth the sooth shall be shent' and 'Hyre and see and say not all' are grouped with other satirical and chanson d'aventure style lyrics between folios 16v and 28r, displaying a distinct interest in issues of contemporary morality.[49] Likewise, Pierpont Morgan Library, Bühler MS 21, a Norwich medical manuscript compiled in the first-half of the fifteenth century by various scribes, contains the two short verses 'I loue and y dare nouȝt' and 'Sey þe best or be stylle' inserted at the beginning of the manuscript along with some proverbs and recipes.[50] Both verses are linked by versions of the proverb 'be stylle and haue thy wylle', indicating that, like Trinity College MS 0.9.38, they were either copied as a prearranged unit or were selected and grouped because of their complimentary nature.[51] Although copied separately from the medical texts, they may have been read alongside them, combining bodily and spiritual care in a holistic approach.

Such examples are only a brief indication of the diverse ways in which moral verses on opprobrious language were disseminated, compiled, and were possibly read in fifteenth-century society. To gain a better understanding of these processes, it would be necessary to make a comprehensive study of the different versions of

[48] Thompson makes this observation in relation to the fifteenth-century versions of the Vernon lyrics; 'Textual Background', p. 223.

[49] As Rigg points out in his commentary upon the manuscript, the general contents of the manuscript testify to the compiler's interest in satirical texts, humorous and parodic items, refrain lyrics, and material relating to Glastonbury abbey and its folklore; *A Glastonbury Miscellany*, pp. 31-3,

[50] A description of Bühler MS 21 and its contents, including transcriptions of the verses, is given by Curt F. Bühler, 'A Middle English Medical Manuscript from Norwich', in *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Croll Baugh*, ed. M. Leach, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), pp. 285-98.

[51] Carol Meale has argued in 'Patrons, Buyers and Owners: Book Production and Social Status', in *Book Production*, ed. Griffiths and Pearsall, pp. 201-38, that the shift towards the more rapid and standardised production of manuscripts meant that texts were increasingly reproduced in set configurations, limiting the amount of individual preference possible. Likewise, Ralph Hanna posits that the recurrence of texts in medieval manuscripts is often a sign of exemplar poverty rather than a genuine preference for certain material; 'Miscellaneity and Vernacularity: Conditions of Literary Production in Late Medieval England', in *The Whole Book: Cultural Perspectives on the Medieval Miscellany*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols, and Siegfried Wenzel, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 47. Neither of these arguments acknowledges how the circulation of different forms of individual texts and poems may have constituted greater diversity than these copying procedures appear to permit.

individual lyrics and examine their manuscript locations and arrangements.[52] In particular, a reassessment is due of the vocabularies used to categorise different versions and forms of lyrics, and the composite manuscripts that contain them. Terms such as 'fragment' are imprecise because they misunderstand the processes of modification and tailoring that were an integral part of these lyrics' transmission. Likewise, the prevailing quandary about the appropriateness of the critical vocabulary used to categorise 'commonplace books' and 'miscellanies' has caused them to become blank terms.[53] Furthermore, in privileging the individuality of commonplace books and miscellanies above their associations with other collections, current criticism has to some extent obscured the potential of such material to provide evidence of social mentalities and reading practices. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to propose resolutions to these problems, these are nonetheless areas that could be fruitfully developed in further work. For the time being, one aspect of these lyrics' fifteenth-century reception is clear: their circulation among a disparate readership permitted them to be applied and customised in ways that both ensured the diffusion of the moral code and tested its uniformity.

2.3 Linguistic instability in Lydgate's moral lyrics

Gauging the composition of the non-clerical readership of anonymous moral verses on opprobrious language and its extent is complicated by the fact that much of the evidence for the circulation of lyrics and proverbs has been lost due to their ephemeral nature.[54] In contrast, the popularity of John Lydgate's work in the fifteenth century means that his moral poems often survive in multiple manuscripts. Reflecting the tastes of his literary patrons, ranging from the Duke of Gloucester to urban

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[52] All of the extant manuscripts copies of the moral verses cited in this chapter are listed in Appendix 1. Appendix 2 lists those manuscripts that contain more than one moral verse on opprobrious language, providing an indicative outline of the range of compilation interests surrounding these poems. Important studies that either take a comparative approach to the study of these manuscripts, or attempt to locate them in their social, cultural, and political milieu are: Boffey, *Manuscripts*; Carol M. Meale, 'The Social and Literary Context of a Late Medieval Manuscript: A Study of BL MS Harley 2252 and it owner John Colyns', 2 vols., unpublished PhD thesis, University of York, 1984, and 'The Compiler at Work: John Colyns and BL MS Harley 2252', in *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth-Century England: The Literary Implications of Manuscript Study*, ed. Derek Pearsall, (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983), pp. 82-103; Margaret L. Kekewich, et als., *The Politics of Fifteenth Century England: John Vale's Book*, (Stroud: A. Sutton, 1995).

[53] See, for instance, the conclusions reached in the essays contained in Nichols and Wenzel, *The Whole Book*.

[54] Boffey, *Manuscripts*, p. 134; Louis, 'Proverbs', pp. 2957-8.

merchants, Lydgate's lyrics are largely representative of a privileged and socially elite audience. Although still centred upon moral teaching, Lydgate's lyrics are more closely allied to courtly tradition and often take the *balade* form used in the Vernon lyrics.[55] The manuscripts which contain Lydgate's lyrics often group them with the work of other courtly writers and are only rarely found alongside the moral lyrics of unidentified authors.[56] Yet in examining Lydgate's attitudes towards opprobrious language, it should not be assumed that his poetry is in any way superior to the anonymous literature previously discussed. Instead it should be understood that Lydgate's lyrics offer an alternative insight into the representation and reception of ideas about linguistic opprobrium among a particular group of readers.

Lydgate's moral lyrics are perhaps most interesting because of his diverse approach, addressing both opprobrious language and more general issues about linguistic instability. It is primarily because of his extensive knowledge of poetic forms and interaction with different audiences that Lydgate was able to push beyond the limits of his monastic career and challenge traditional expectations with his work. Maura Nolan's study of Lydgate's use of spectacle has shown how he used public display to reinvent forms and genres, whilst overlaying them with appropriated discourses in order to defy convention.[57] Such innovative tactics are primarily the product of Lydgate's identity as a court writer associated with the Lancastrian regime,[58] but they can also be witnessed in his general world view. Lydgate's moral lyrics follow the trends of other fifteenth-century lyric writers in commenting upon

[55] Other examples of these kinds of moral lyrics on the subject of opprobrious language include Robert Henryson's 'Fals titlaris now growis vp full rank'; John Skelton's 'Against venomous tongues'; and Charles d'Orleans's 'Ther nys in me comfort of gladnes'. For editions containing these respective poems, see *The Bannatyne Manuscript, compiled by George Bannatyne, 1568*, 4 vols., (New York and London: Johnson Reprint Company, 1966; orig. pub. by the Hunterian Club, 1906), pp. 182-4; John Skelton, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Scattergood, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp. 136-40; *The English Poems of Charles of Orleans*, ed. Robert Steele and Mabel Day, EETS 215, 220 (1941, 1946).

[56] However, the erroneous designation of some lyrics to canonical authors such as Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century manuscripts means that they crossed social boundaries in ways that challenge modern literary classification and value judgments.

[57] Maura Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 1-29.

[58] Lydgate's Lancastrian associations are detailed by Paul Strohm in 'Hoccleve, Lydgate, and the Lancastrian Court', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 640-61. See also Scott Morgan Straker, 'Propaganda, Intentionality, and the Lancastrian Lydgate', in *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England*, ed. Larry Scanlon and James Simpson, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), pp. 98-128, for a reassessment of Lydgate's identification as a Lancastrian propagandist.

opprobrious language and contemporary social disorder, but despite his adoption of the same moral vocabulary, his treatment is often critical as well as instructive. Language is treated both as an independent subject and in relation to other moral issues in ways that test its representative capacity. Furthermore, the varied presentation of the poems as ballads, expositions, and even self-conscious critiques, makes for a comprehensive investigation of the subject that engages directly with the deviant possibilities of linguistic instability.

Unfortunately, Lydgate's often complex approach to moral comment has been largely overlooked in the ongoing critical debate over his status as a writer and the indeterminacy of the Lydgate canon. Derek Pearsall's biography of Lydgate exemplifies the poet's negative reception by representing his work as the epitome of fifteenth-century inertia.[59] Yet, as James Simpson notes, because much of Lydgate's work was commissioned, it was tailored to the diction and style expected by the patron. Moreover, Lydgate's unfavourable status needs to be acknowledged as the product of Tudor political manoeuvring when Chaucer became 'the primary poet, and almost the *sole* poet, of pre-Reformation England'.[60] Prior to his largely sixteenth-century demonisation, Lydgate's work was highly esteemed by fifteenth-century readers. His lyrics circulated widely both as complete poems and independent stanzas, and often survive in similar configurations across manuscripts, indicating that they were produced by a restricted group of copyists.[61] Lydgate's lyrics on opprobrious language and satires on worldly mutability feature prominently in these collections, but have received very little critical attention. Henry MacCracken's edition of Lydgate's 'minor poems' is itself a conclusion about their poetic value, categorising them as trivial in their exploration of commonplace themes. If we are to appreciate the enthusiasm of contemporary readers for these moral lyrics, then clearly it is necessary to regard them as expressing an affinity with popular mentalities.

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[59] Derek A. Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 15-7, 298-9.
[60] Simpson, *Reform*, pp. 41-3, 60.
[61] Julia Boffey, 'Short Texts in Manuscript Anthologies: The Minor Poems of John Lydgate in Two Fifteenth-Century Collections', in Nichols and Wenzel, *The Whole Book*, p. 72. The most prominent scribe associated with Lydgate's work is John Shirley. For a detailed discussion of Shirley's life and the argument that his anthologies were produced for a courtly audience, see Margaret Connolly, *John Shirley: Book Production and the Noble Household in Fifteenth-Century England*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 192-4. For alternative arguments about Shirley's occupation and further bibliography, see Boffey and Thompson, 'Anthologies and Miscellanies', pp. 284-7.

Many of Lydgate's lyrics that treat linguistic issues are derived from and explore proverbial wisdom. As Pearsall observes, much of Lydgate's material is extracted from Cato's *Distichs*, a popular school text, and basis for the *sententiae* that circulated in *florilegia*.[62] As Simpson points out, by recycling these precepts in their work, writers like Lydgate were asserting their learnedness rather than a lack of innovation.[63] In fact, Lydgate and his contemporaries were not so much representing a common understanding of the material as trying to establish what this understanding should be. Lydgate's *Distichs*-inspired poems upon opprobrious language illustrate this deliberation. 'A wicked tongue will sey amys' develops the concerns outlined in the carol 'Ittes knowyn in euery schyre' to produce a lengthy exposition of almost every defamatory criticism that might be alleged about an honest man by slanderers. It is only at the end of the poem that the source of the moral is stated and its significance expounded:

> Moste noble princes, cherissheris of vertu,
> Remembreth ȝow of high discrecioun,
> The first vertu most plesyng to Ih[es]u
> Be the writing and sentence of Catoun
> Is a gode tonge, yn his oppynyoun.
> Chastiseth the reuers, & of wisdom dothe this,
> Voideth ȝowre heryng from al that sey a-mys.[64] (127-133)

The fact that the poem does not assert its relevance as a mirror for princes until the final stanza is representative of Lydgate's general monitory approach, preferring an inclusive investigation of the subject over a pointed address.[65] In 'Say the best and never repent', Lydgate undertakes an equally comprehensive account of the evils of opprobrious speech that includes comment upon the specific effects of the vice in royal counsellors:

> For cankered mouthis doth most mortal grefe,
> Namly when princeȝ list to yeue hem audiens,
> For slaughtyr of sword doth not so grete offens

[62] Pearsall, *Lydgate*, p. 206. On Cato's *Distichs* as a teaching text, see Orme, *Medieval Schools*, pp. 98-105.
[63] Simpson, *Reform*, pp. 64-5.
[64] *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, vol. 2: secular poems, EETS o.s. 192, (1934). All quotations from Lydgate's lyrics are from this edition.
[65] On the mirrors for princes, see Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

As mordir of tonges. (24-7)

The notion that slander's deadly effects are greater than the mortality incurred by warfare reiterates the monarch's responsibility to make judgments based upon reliable report, and not to rely upon a coterie of self-seeking officials. Yet unlike the pointed address of 'Who says the sooth shall be shent', Lydgate downplays his own opinion by pitching his advice as little more than a series of observations framed by the proverb. In doing so, he diminishes the hazards associated with advising a prince to remove deceitful counsellors without undermining the strength of his position.

In all of Lydgate's moral lyrics the proverbs are made the central issue rather than their interpretation. It is a technique that suits Lydgate's purpose, permitting him to address a number of themes relative to opprobrious language without committing himself to a single argument. The practice illustrates how multivalent the treatment of these proverbs could be, despite their prominent cultural status. 'Say the best and never repent' provides a particularly good example of this process in both reworking traditional proverbs, and including an additional 'text' that appears to expand upon the initial 'ballad'. As Pearsall observes, although the succeeding text was probably not written by Lydgate, the practice of elaborating upon existing poems was common to him.[66] Framed by the conventions of *chanson d'aventure*, the 'text' visualises itself as a distinct account:

> Within a park I found a bill
> Vndir a bank beside a bent,
> Directid to folk þat lyst to speke yll,
> "Who seith the best shall neuer repent." (40-43)

Yet although the discovery of the 'bill' refers to the proverb 'Who seith the best shall neuer repent', the fact that this is also the first line of the preceding 'ballad' indicates that the two poems may have been circulated as a unit even if they were not compiled together. When read together, as they were probably intended to be in the only surviving manuscript copy, Bodleian Library MS 1475, they are complementary. The 'ballad' takes the alternating proverbial refrain 'tong brekith boone' (6) in its

[66] Pearsall, *Lydgate*, p. 210.

exposition of the critical nature of slander,[67] while the 'text' focuses upon providing solutions to the situation. These resolutions are introduced through a series of mainly biblical examples of opprobrious language which support the moral to repent and follow Cato's precepts (92-3, 108-115, 124-131). The two poems thus represent a dialogue that extends beyond the basic construction of a moral followed by its exposition.

From the prominence afforded to proverbs in these poems, it is clear that their signification of consistent, stable values was intended to contrast the uncertainties raised by opprobrious language. 'The cok hath lowe shoone' explores this relationship in detail, distinguishing the knowledge of Cato and proverbial wisdom from the meaninglessness of inflated rhetoric:

> Ful offte it noyeth be record of Catoun
> Large language concluding off no sentence;
> Speche is but foly and sugryd eloquence
> Medlyd with language where man haue noght to don.
> An old proverbe grounded on sapience
> Alle goo we stille, the Cok hath lowe shoon. (3-8)

The poem is littered with proverbs, including Lydgatean commonplaces such as 'Vtter nevir no darnel with good corn' (19), which recurs in 'Say the best and never repent' as 'Take the darnel and cast corn fro the sheffe' (10). Most significant is the refrain proverb, which is presented with reference to its quotation by the third cock in the extremely popular exemplum of the three cocks in the *Gesta Romanorum*. The tale tells of an adulterous woman who asks her servant to interpret the crowing of three cocks. The first cock reprimands her for her adultery; the second reproaches her for killing the first cock because he told the truth; the third cock holds its tongue for fear of reprisal, saying only: 'here, and se, and hold the stille, and than thou may have all thy wille'.[68] According to the moral grafted onto the story in BL Additional MS 9066, the third cock's survival is an allegory of contemporary times:

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[67] The proverb is extracted from Proverbs 25:15 and Ecclesiasticus 28. It often appears in relation to backbiting, as in the carol 'Ther is non gras that growit on ground', and as Wenzel notes in *Verses in Sermons*, p. 138, was located under the heading of *multiloquium* in preaching handbooks such as the *Fasciculus morum*.

[68] *The Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum*, ed. Sidney J. H. Herrtage, EETS e.s. 33 (1962), p. 175 (BL Additional MS 9066). The version of the story contained in BL Harley MS 7333 records the speech as: ''her, and see, & sey nowte, þenne þu maiste have alle thi wille'. *Versus: Audi,*

> The thirde Cokke ar prelates and prechours, that in thise daies dare not ne wille not sey the trouthe, but flatter the peple. Wo shall be to such at domesday![69]

The satirical swipe in the moral is also developed in 'The cok hath lowe shoon', but is extended to cover every estate as part of Lydgate's evaluation of contemporary discord: 'Thynges contrarye may nevir accorde in oon...The wourld is tournyd almost vp so doun' (46, 49). In doing so, Lydgate's argument that silence is preferable to immoderate speech takes the opposite stance to the *Gesta* moral, replicating the contrasting treatments of suppressed truth-telling found in 'Who says the sooth will be shent' and 'But thou say the sooth thou will be shent'. Rather than create tension between the original exemplum and his rendering of the proverb, Lydgate's invention of the soft-shoed cock exploits the 'sapience' of the proverb and reinforces prevailing injunctions for caution against slander.

Adaptations of this proverb are common and are especially frequent in lyrics concerning opprobrious language. Both the lyric 'Whate-ever thow sey, A-vyse thee welle!' and the carol 'Whatsoeuer ye thynk, avyse ye wele' refer to the *Gesta* story in their promotion of cautious speech. Like 'The cok hath lowe shoon', they interpret the proverb as advocating silence, stating respectively 'the kocke seyth wysly on his songe/ hyre and see, and hold the style' (45-6) and 'Her and se, and kepe the styll;/ Whatsoeuer ye thynk, avyse ye wele'. As Wenzel notes in his study of the verses contained in the *Fasciculus Morum*, the proverb also circulated independently of the *Gesta* exemplum as a proverb against *multiloquium*: 'Se and here and holde þe stylle,/ ȝefe þou wolte lyue and haue þy wylle'.[70] In BL Harley MS 665, a codex of mainly Latin religious texts, the proverb appears in a short verse inscribed upon the back page:

> Say well or be styll
> Suffyr and haue all thy wyll

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vide, tace, sit tu vis viuere pace'. Alternatively, BL Harley MS 2270 records: 'See and here, and holde the stylle, than myȝt thou lyue and haue thy wylle'.

[69] *Ibid*, p. 178. BL Harley MS 7333 has: 'the thirde cok, that is not slayne, beþe prelates & prechovris that beþe now, that dare not, ne wolle not seye soothe, but plesithe al men; and the mor harm is'.

[70] Although Wenzel notes that the proverb is also found in the *Gesta Romanorum* and 'Whate-ever thow sey, A-vyse thee welle!', he does not note the wider circulation of this proverb nor the implications of these deployments; *Verses in Sermons*, pp. 139-40.

Know or þou tryst
And be warre of hardy wys—[71] (f. 302r)

Here the proverb is coupled with further lines of moral advice that elaborate its cautionary function. Its extension may indicate that it was transcribed from a sermon or copied from a list of proverbs, but the additions may also represent personal invention. Bilingual lists of proverbs in English and Latin were used as translation exercises and often include advice about cautious speech. [72] Memorisation of these maxims may well have provided the basis for individuals to compose their own poems on the subject, either with a view to educating others or customising the advice for personal reflection. The two linked verses found in New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Bühler MS 21 may represent a similar construction. Although 'Sey þe beste or be style' is little more than a preaching tag, it differs from the version found in the *Fasciculus morum*, and is followed by a Latin rendering of the proverb that is dissimilar from that given in the *Gesta* stories:

Sey þe beste or be style
Wyth thy tonge noman thou qwelle
Suffyr and haue thy wylle

Optimam dic ve tace
Nullum perimat tua lingua
Suffer pacifice
Sic vota carpe tua.[73]

Likewise, the preceding verse, 'I loue and y dare nouȝt', locates the advice 'be meke & style/ and þou shalt haue alle þy wylle' within a series of maxims ending with the word 'nouȝt', developing the linked proverb 'her, and see, & sey nowte'.[74] In all of these moral verses, the authority of the proverb is the principal feature. It is this

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[71] If the rhyme scheme is followed, it is probable that the final word of the verse is 'wyst', but the page is very stained and the last word is obscured.
[72] Examples include the proverbs included in the translation exercises listed in NLW Peniarth MS 356 (ff. 148v and 150v), BL Harley MS 3362 (f. 4r), and BL Additional MS 37049 (f. 86). On the use of 'vulgaria' to teach grammar, see Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Schools*, pp. 109-18.
[73] Bühler, 'A Middle English Medical Manuscript', p. 289.
[74] In the *Fasciculus Morum*, 'Here and see and say noght' is recorded as a separate proverb from 'Se and here and holde þe stylle'; Wenzel, *Verses in Sermons*, pp. 139-40. The proverb 'Here and see and say noȝt' is the basis of the refrain lyric 'Hyre and see and say not all'. As Rigg observes, it is also found in courtesy books such as *The Young Children's Book* (l. 101); 'A Fifteenth Century Commonplace Book', volume two, p. 272. In *Notes and Queries* 149 (1925), p. 369, 'Hear all, see all, say now't' is recorded as a traditional Yorkshire proverb. Rhymes on 'nought' were common and cover a range of themes; for other examples and manuscript references, see Meale, 'Social and Literary Context', p. 36.

constant status that permits it to be reworked and associated with other moral maxims at the freedom of the individual writer's impulse.

The varied deployment of proverbs indicates that reinterpretation was central to their ongoing social and cultural relevance. However, in relation to the changing status of opprobrious language, it also indicates more complex concerns, as the incorporation of these proverbs into moral verses shows. In their emphasis upon their sources, their assertion of the weight of their advisory position, and the sheer need for constant reaffirmation of their message, these poems display a decided self-consciousness. This unease is not transparent in the forceful tone used to convey the moral, but instead emerges through the difficulty of how to denounce derisive and malignant language without resorting to its vocabulary. What emerges is a crisis of representation, created by the difficulties of trying to isolate linguistic meanings when language is characteristically mutable. Lydgate addresses the issue directly in 'The cok hath lowe shoon' by testing the extent to which personal adaptation could be taken. In addition to citing his proverbial sources, Lydgate offsets them with a series of apparently random and increasingly cryptic metaphorical references to objects and animals that serve as mini-exempla:

> Foo vnto **hevys** and enemy is the **drane:**
> Men with a tabour may lightly cache an **hare,**
> **Bosard** with **botirflyes** makith beytis for a **crane,**
> Brechelees **beerys** be betyn on the bare;
> Houndys for favour wyl nat spare,
> To pynche his pylche with greet noyse and soun,
> Slepith he merye that sloumbryth with greet care;
> Alle goo we stille, the **Cok** hath lowe shoon. (121-8)

In BL Harley MS 2255, which contains the only extant copy of the poem, attention is drawn to the references by their rubrication in red, which are represented in bold type in the quotation above. According to Pearsall, the poem's enigmatic construction defers interpretation to the reader, presenting a discursive rather than didactic approach.[75] By presenting the proverbs and metaphors amid a jumble of competing meanings, any single interpretation of them is overridden. Testing the capacity of proverbs to provide clear-cut advice in a poem about linguistic instability raises

[75] Pearsall, *Lydgate*, p. 211.

highly provoking questions about how a benchmark of acceptable meaning should be established and maintained.

Furthermore, in complicating the ability of proverbs to represent straightforward advice, Lydgate's presentation undermines the basis of the moral discourse upon which these poems are founded. His reasons for doing so may be directly linked to the social values of his audience. Lydgate's poems often appear in anthologies owned by gentry and bourgeois readers. These readers were united by their desire to distinguish themselves from their social inferiors, purchasing manuscripts containing the poetry of canonical authors in accordance with the courtly tastes of the nobility.[76] However, in some cases, the assertion of social status represented an attempt to mask how this had been achieved through social-climbing; as Lerer notes, the proliferation of manuals of public behaviour was driven by the requirements of 'a newly enfranchised gentry and a rising London commercial class'.[77] The secular tone of Lydgate's moral poetry clearly identifies it with the fashionable tastes of these readers, but in doing so, it sets their conservative values at odds with their consumerism and progressive aspirations. The tension created by Lydgate's search for a resolution to this problem results in a resort to extremes. 'Consulo quisquis eris' exemplifies his desperation in its advice about social conformity. It lists a series of individuals and animals and their appropriate conduct as illustrations of the proverb 'Lyke the audience so vttir thy langauge':

> Yiff thou wilt lyve in pees and vnite,
> Conform thy-sylff and thynk on this sentence,
> Wher-so-evere thou hold residence,
> Among woluys be woluyssh of corage,
> Leoun with leouns, a lamb for innocence,
> Lyke the audience so vttir thy language. (3-8)

These commands to follow convention amount to an affirmation of natural order akin to that envisaged in 'Every thing to his semblable'. In the ensuing 'verba translatoris', Lydgate enlarges upon the proverb's import by listing examples of some historical figures who failed to moderate their ambitions and exceeded their social rank. The

[76] Seth Lerer, 'William Caxton', in Wallace, *Cambridge History*, p. 724. As both Lindenbaum in 'London Texts', p. 302, and Boffey in *Manuscripts*, p. 125, note, merchant readers were not a separate 'class', often overlapping with the gentry in status and lifestyle.
[77] Lerer, 'William Caxton', p. 724.

resulting vision is of an ideal social order maintained by the observance of almost stereotypical models of behaviour, where everyone in society conforms to their traditional position and role.

For Pearsall, the 'awkward and fumbling' construction of the lyric and its banal message portray Lydgate at his poetic worst.[78] Read as a response to linguistic instability, however, the ballad becomes more than just a trite exposition of the proverb. In calling for linguistic standardisation, the poem can be seen to be attempting to fix meaning. Yet in adding the explanation of the translator, Lydgate also shows that the arrangement is insufficient to its task. It is unclear whether the first half of the poem is indeed a translation, but the idea that its proverbs need to be explained challenges the simplicity of their meaning and social applicability. By advocating the mimicry of certain group's discourses, the proverb can be misread as encouraging self-seeking rather than compliance and the curbing of individualism. Moreover, not all of the examples promote good conduct, but instead represent a range of behaviour in support of the belief that maintaining expectations is more important than the correction of vice:

> ...with a glotoun be delicat of thy ffare,
> With dronke men do surfetys by exesse,
> And among wastours no spending that thou spare;
> With woodecokkys lerne for to dare,
> And sharpe thy knyff with pilours for pilage. (18-22)

To urge the unthinking imitation of such behaviour can be read as an indictment upon contemporary times, where it is necessary to resort to any means to avoid the suspicions incurred by imprudent language use. In an environment where linguistic abuses could be associated with social mobility, such issues represent an increasing anxiety about the relationship between language and social order.

Lydgate emphasises this critical situation in a series of poems treating the problem of linguistic restrictions. In doing so, it becomes apparent that he is not simply taking the conservative position of declaiming his own inability to find adequate language to represent contemporary instability. As a poet who is particularly

[78] Pearsall, *Lydgate*, p. 209.

proud of his verbal display, the issue is not with the selection of appropriate words but with how their meaning has become increasingly unstable. In 'Tyed with a line', the problem is signified by the despondent acknowledgment that the world goes by antitheses that cannot be reconciled:

> The more I go, the further I am behynde;
> The further behind, the nere the weyes end;
> The more I seche, the wers can I fynd;
> The ligther the leve, the lother for to wend;
> The lengger I serve, the more out of mynd;
> Is this fortune, or is it infortune?
> Though I go loose, I tyed am with a lyne. (1-7)

From this opening, Lydgate again exhaustively expands the theme of the vicissitudes of fortune until he reaches the conclusion that death is the only certainty in life.[79] These extremes are also treated in 'Ryme without accord', which develops the theme of the refrain that contraries may be made to rhyme in poetry, but in reality cannot be united: 'It may wele ryme, but it accordith nought'. In arguing that positions such as having 'a knave to comande and have an empire' are social impossibilities, it also confronts the reader with a series of unsettling possibilities that must be weighed against their contemporary experience. Once again, it is language that is responsible for the situation: not only do words articulate the poem, but they also force social contraries into an artificial rhyming order.

That language can be misinterpreted and manipulated to signify contrary meanings is an indication of social turmoil. 'The wourld is varyable' takes a traditional approach to the idea, contrasting a once golden age with the contemporary decline in standards. Yet in doing so, it focuses chiefly upon failings that have particular resonance in the fifteenth century, namely a decline in military prowess and the position of the common people:

> In the goldene wourld ech man kept his degree,
> Chevalrye delityd nat with marchaundise,
> Nyse array in the comunaltee
> Lefft was, lyst them nat desguyse. (25-8)

[79] The opening stanza also circulated independently, and in Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 3896 (Fairfax MS 16) is attributed to Halsham rather than Lydgate; Pearsall, *Lydgate*, p. 215. Connolly discusses the identity of Halsham in *John Shirley*, p. 39.

Inconsistency has overturned these values, manifesting in intrigue and deception at all social levels. The fox plays with the hare 'in feyned pees, [and] to fals conclusion' (44) to suit its own ambitions, epitomising how each estate pursues their own interests to the point that their 'contrarye destroyeth the body political' (79). Lydgate's vision is complex and uncompromising, with little suggestion of resolution. The concluding 'envoy' to the poem depicts it as an agent of change but, like his previous expositions of proverbial wisdom, it too relies upon a common understanding of its message in order to take effect:

> Goo, litil bille, and vndir socour
> To euery estaat, this proverbe present,
> Ech tale is endid, as it hath favour,
> For among many ech man seith his entent.
> A greet multitude in oon to make assent. (105-9)

Exactly who the intended audience are in the appeal is unclear; although addressed 'to euery estaat', the notion of sending the bill forth of its own accord, apparently by oral dissemination, implies a shared understanding in society that the poem does not maintain. With the proverb merely acknowledging that change is unavoidable, the irony is that even if social groups were to reunite under common interpretative limits again, it would make little difference. Worldly variability has wrought a situation where the only representation is through binaries and the only possible conclusion is that inconsistency prevails.

2.4 Conclusion

In charting the development of the subject of opprobrious language in moral verses, this chapter has shown that its status and representation altered dramatically. The presentation of these verses shifts from an articulation of complaint with traditional resolutions, to a situation where language is considered a significant and unstable force. Rather than just a rhetorical construct, the proliferation of moral verses upon the subject indicates that the divisive capacities of opprobrious expression were an immediate reality in the fifteenth century. As the continual redeployment and consolidation of particular themes and proverbs shows, the particularisation of

opprobrious language as a subject permitted moral discourse to promote itself as a counter-language. Upon this basis, it is easier to reconstruct the principles underlying the inculcation of the moral code than it is to establish why opprobrious language was isolated as a particular threat. However, the dissemination of these verses reveals some indications of why concerns about opprobrious language became so prominent. As vehicles for the popularisation of moral teaching about language, they draw directly upon the literate capacities of an expanding fifteenth-century vernacular readership. The increasingly varied forms that these verses took and their diverse manuscript contexts are a testament to the impact of its diffusion. In doing so, the moral code becomes more secularised, achieving social significance beyond its clerical association with the teaching of the sins of the tongue. By reinforcing the authority of their address and being propagated among a wider audience, these verses developed in direct relation to the social changes that inspired the growth of literacy.

The extensive distribution of these verses indicates that their readers respected their teaching and shared its concerns. However, the varied transmission of the verses also indicates that their audience was not a homogeneous group. It is clear from the extant manuscript evidence that the readers of anonymous lyrics on opprobrious language were not necessarily the readers of Lydgate's moral verses. This does not mean that individual poems or manuscripts did not represent or participate in a shared moral culture. Instead it indicates that ideas about the status and capacity of language crystallised in different social groups in ways that reflected their identities and expressed their values. Such is indicated by the way that these verses circulated in different forms and were compiled with different types of material. Adaptation of this kind was central to the ongoing relevance of the moral code, but in a climate where the politics surrounding language were critical, the practice could also raise unsettling issues of meaning and control. However, an artificial distinction should not be made here between the oral and written forms of this practice. When the verses address issues about the straightforwardness of the moral code's application and the fixity of its principles, it is not literacy alone that is responsible for raising them. Rather it is concerns about the linguistic practices of the newly literate that are critical. Underlying the fifteenth-century focus upon rumour and slander in these verses is an awareness of the growing power of these forms of expression and their users, and the threat they posed to traditional discourses and their exclusivity. Chapter three

examines these changing dynamics in greater detail by assessing how the popularisation of certain social and cultural ideas led to their politicisation and the instatement of particular categories of opprobrious language.

Chapter 3

The Politicisation of Opprobrious Language: Rumour and Seditious Speech

Between the years 1444 and 1457, at least twenty-six charges of seditious speech were brought before the King's Bench.[1] Expressing dissatisfaction was part of the process by which contemporary issues were evaluated, but the number of indictments made in the middle of the fifteenth century was exceptional. Seditious speech was established as a treasonable offence by the Great Statute of Treasons of 1352.[2] In addition, the Statute of Westminster, passed in 1275 to prevent social unrest arising from the defamation of magnates, was repeatedly re-enacted throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, indicating increasing fears about the effects of opprobrious language.[3] Under Henry IV, the necessity of legitimising the Lancastrian regime after the deposition of Richard II caused the application of the legislation to be modified. 'Treason by words' was not only conflated with notions of heresy to condemn traitors and heretics alike,[4] but as Paul Strohm observes, was also innovatively employed to pre-empt popular protest rather than just respond to it.[5] If, as J. G. Bellamy argues, that 'concepts of treason never flourish in a vacuum' but 'depend greatly on the prevailing thesis of government', then the increasing attention paid to subversive language must be linked to the changing dynamics of power in the

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[1] I. M. W. Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 31.

[2] J. G. Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in the Later Middle Ages*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 78. For debate about whether words constituted an overt or covert act of sedition, see Paul Strohm, *England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399-1422*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 26; Samuel Rezneck, 'Constructive Treason by Words in the Fifteenth Century', *American Historical Review* 33 (1928), 544-52; and Isobel D. Thornley, 'Treason by Words in the Fifteenth Century', *English Historical Review* 32 (1917), 556-61.

[3] On the enactment and re-enactment of the statute, see Michael Hanrahan, 'Defamation as Political Contest during the Reign of Richard II', *Medium Ævum* 72 (2003), p. 259; Wendy Scase, ''Strange and Wonderful Bills': Bill-Casting and Political Discourse in Late Medieval England', *New Medieval Literatures* 2 (1998), pp. 228-30; Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 31-6.

[4] Simon Walker, 'Rumour, Sedition and Popular Protest in the Reign of Henry IV', *Past and Present* 166 (2000), pp. 59-60; Margaret Aston, 'Lollardy and Sedition, 1381-1431', in Hudson, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion*, (London: Hambledon Press, 1984), pp. 1-47. For further details on the Lancastrian programme against heresy, see Peter McNiven, *Heresy and Politics in the Reign of Henry IV: The Burning of John Badby*, (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1987), and Steven Justice, 'Lollardy', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 662-89.

[5] Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, p. 26.

period.[6] With cases of seditious speech increasing rapidly after 1440, anxieties about disorder can be witnessed coalescing around opprobrious language and shaping its political dimensions.

Unlike the critical attention paid to the expression of dissent in the sixteenth century, the significance of rumour and seditious speech in the mid-fifteenth century has generally been overlooked.[7] Historians such as Robin Storey, Bertram Wolffe, and I. M. W. Harvey have treated the rise in indictments for the crime as incidental evidence of the deterioration of national politics and accepted standards of order.[8] Read as comments upon the ineptitude of Henry VI, focus shifted away from their popular expression to a general judgment upon failing standards. The tendency to downplay the significance of popular political expression also partly arises from the recognition that it was formulated within a common political domain. As Harvey explains:

> 'popular politics' is not understood to mean popular political goals or a set of agendas distinct from those of the ruling class. By that definition there was no popular politics in fifteenth-century England.[9]

Public political discussion was conducted within a 'common discursive space' using a 'common language of politics'.[10] Following these principles, the form, vocabulary, and subjects of political protest have been located within a continuous tradition of

[6] Bellamy, *Law of Treason*, pp. 120, 129.

[7] Studies of seditious words and their relation to popular opinion in the early modern period have been numerous. For some of the most recent work, see Ethan H. Shagan, 'Rumours and Popular Politics in the Reign of Henry VIII', in *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500-1850*, ed. Tim Harris, (Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 30-66; Andy Wood, ''Poore men woll speke one daye': Plebeian Languages of Deference and Defiance in England, c. 1520-1640', in *The Politics of the Excluded*, ed. Harris, pp. 67-98; Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, pp. 335-405; Adam Fox, 'Rumour, News and Popular Political Opinion in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England', *Historical Journal* 40 (1997), 597-620.

[8] Robin L. Storey, *The End of the House of Lancaster*, (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1966), pp. 34-5; Bertram Wolffe, *Henry VI*, (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 17-18; Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, pp. 31-2.

[9] I. M. W. Harvey, 'Was there Popular Politics in Fifteenth-Century England?', in *The McFarlane Legacy: Studies in Late Medieval Politics and Society*, ed. Richard H. Britnell and A. J. Pollard, (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1995), p. 155.

[10] Walker, 'Rumour, Sedition and Popular Protest', p. 65; John L. Watts, 'The Pressure of the Public on Later Medieval Politics', in *The Fifteenth Century IV: Political Culture in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. Linda Clark and Christine Carpenter, (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), p. 161; Harvey, 'Popular Politics', p. 161.

dissent across the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[11] Anne Middleton's study of the literary common voice in late-fourteenth century poetry treats its emergence as a rhetorical device concerned to represent the 'common good' in an ideal world order.[12] Yet although a language of common values may have emerged in relation to popular restlessness, it represents as much of an imagined public as it does actual voices. Conventional political language was increasingly used by a broad cross-section of the common people, but it was their desire for inclusion in the community of the realm rather than the forging of an independent political identity that motivated them.[13] The 'common voice' thus represented popular political involvement at a public level, where complaint was rehearsed within accepted political and legal boundaries.[14] Although representative of the extension of political involvement down the social scale, the 'common voice' also became a generic category of complaint which the governing elite could use to regulate criticism and restrict popular involvement in public politics.[15]

Setting dissent within the political order that shaped and evaluated it provides an important frame for its evaluation. However, as the rise in cases of seditious speech

[11] Watts, 'Pressure of the Public', p. 168. In 'Dissent in Middle English Literature: The Spirit of (Thirteen) Seventy-Six', *Medievalia et Humanistica* 9 (1979), pp. 25-7, Rossell Hope Robbins argues for an even more extensive tradition of dissent, ranging from ancient to modern times. However, although the subject of abuses of the age literature may be relatively unvarying, changes in the language used to express these complaints should be noted. The vernacular voice of protest heard in late fourteenth-century literature is less elitist in tone than its Anglo-Norman predecessor, which is articulated trilingually and treats its subject in general terms. Although these early complaint poems foreshadow some of the opinions of later writers, their macaronic presentation prevents them from having a similar political identity. For examples of Anglo-Norman political poetry, see Isobel S. T. Aspin, ed., *Anglo-Norman Political Songs*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953).

[12] Anne Middleton, 'The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II', *Speculum* 53 (1978), 94-114.

[13] Watts, 'Pressure of the Public', pp. 160-2. Watts's argument that the common voice was used by a vernacular public beyond the gentry and merchants is targeted particularly at Janet Coleman's restriction of the common voice to these literate middling groups (166). See Janet Coleman, *English Literature in History, 1350-1400: Medieval Readers and Writers*, (London: Hutchinson, 1981), pp. 61-8.

[14] Sheila Lindenbaum, 'London Texts and Literate Practice', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. Wallace, p. 290. The Digby poems provide a good example of the way that the common voice was incorporated into political poetry; see *Twenty-Six Political and Other Poems*, ed. J. Kail, part 1, EETS o. s. 124, (1904). On the development of popular complaint in relation to petitioning, see Wendy Scase, *Literature and Complaint in England, 1272-1553*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[15] Watts, 'Pressure of the Public', pp. 178-9, and see also pp. 164-73 for a useful exploration of the meaning of 'public' for both contemporaries and modern criticism. The prominence of the terms 'communes' and 'commonweal' in political discourse between 1381 and 1450 is discussed by David Rollison in 'The Specter of the Commonalty: Class Struggle and the Commonweal in England before the Atlantic World', *William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (2006), 221-52.

and the repeated re-enactment of laws against opprobrious language shows, the complaints represented by the common voice are only tangentially related to the kinds of criticism that were considered subversive. Although the growing political acumen of the common people resulted in their increasing engagement in public politics, it did not mean that more progressive approaches to achieving restitution were no longer entertained. As order began to collapse in the mid-fifteenth century, calls for reform were mingled with opprobrious comments that disparaged the ruling regime. Michael Hanrahan has observed that slander proliferates in times of crisis because it is a 'model of power that is reversible', it being difficult to distinguish genuine accounts of wrongdoing from malicious imputations.[16] Popular complaints about ministerial wrongdoing and monarchical inadequacy follow this principle because they constitute both legitimate criticism and denigrate the authority and position of the individuals they pertain to. Efforts to determine the veracity of these claims were hampered further by those speakers who exploited the power of opprobrious language by fabricating cases of seditious speech and spreading false rumours. Current political circumstances may have provided the opportunity for this language to be deployed, but it was the growing self-awareness of their political identity that encouraged these speakers to attempt to capitalise upon their position.

To a certain extent, the parameters within which the political consciousness of the common people formed were fashioned by the authorities. Political language was centred upon the ideas, metaphors and images popularised by the Church and government to shape belief and gain public support. The profound imaginative impact that these strategies exerted upon the people not only encouraged their compliance but also raised expectations about the fulfilment of their claims. In addition, under Henry V proclamations began to be read in English, encouraging the diffusion of governmental propaganda among the common people.[17] By making the vernacular a common political language, the influence of existing vernacular discourses and their users was enhanced. Moreover, as Strohm argues of the attempts to legitimise Lancastrian rule, the 'explanatory economy' at the heart of this exegetical practice

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[16] Hanrahan, 'Defamation as Political Contest', 259.

[17] For a reassessment of the term 'propaganda' and its relevance in this period, see James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution. Oxford English Literary History volume 2, 1350-1547*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 64-5. On the use of English by the Lancastrian regime and its establishment as a national language, see John H. Fisher, 'A Language Policy for Lancastrian England', *PMLA* 107 (1992), 1168-80.

was not limited to an intellectual elite; the same process took place across society in the intercourse of everyday conversation.[18] With the descent into civil war in the middle of the fifteenth century, fears surrounded the extent and implications of such public reinterpretation. The freedom of the people to approach political ideas creatively proposed frighteningly unbounded possibilities for the re-signification, and hence invalidation, of official discourses. Such is recognised by the emphasis placed upon curbing the deviant 'imagination' of seditious speakers. As Strohm explains, the compassing and imagining of the king's death were treated as synonymous concepts by the 'Great Statute', but they were actually very different:

> To 'compass' the death of the king is to lay a plan for it, to undertake a series of steps leading to its fulfilment; to 'imagine' the death of the king is to form an image or phantasm of the king's death in the mind.[19]

The 'images or phantasms' created by the imagination were generally regarded as things seen or felt by the senses, but it was also deemed possible for the mind to create images that did not originate in direct experience. It was this dangerous creative capacity that permitted the intention to kill the king and the contemplation of the king's death to be regarded as mutual acts.

At the heart of concerns about popular political discussion is the potential for dissident speakers to conceive alternative world views. By prosecuting seditious speech as a separate act from rebellion, the intention was to forestall the execution of these plans. The concern to prevent individual dissent from becoming a collective belief became especially urgent after the 1381 rebellion. The letters that circulated among the rebels showed not only the emergence of an active popular consciousness, but also a growing threat to Church and state in the form of a separatist literate popular culture in the vernacular.[20] Study of the development of popular political culture has largely been limited to 1381 and the growth of literacy.[21] A pertinent example is provided by the considerable attention paid to the production and

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[18] Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, p. 19.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[20] On the letters produced in the 1381 rising, see Richard Firth Green, 'John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature', in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 176-200; Susan Crane, 'The Writing Lesson of 1381', in *Chaucer's England*, ed. Hanawalt, pp. 201-21; Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*, (Berkeley and London: University of California, 1994), pp. 13-66.

[21] Walker, 'Rumour, Sedition and Popular Protest', p. 64.

transmission of popular political poetry.[22] The assumption that these ballads represent consistent insight into popular political mentalities has been tempered by questions about whether the beliefs voiced represent actual opinion or were designed to inspire it.[23] Artificial distinctions between orality and literacy have particularly foundered upon the impossibility of recovering actual spoken voices once they are submitted to writing, but as Chris Wickham has argued, this should not obscure the fact that speaking and writing remain coexistent and continue to influence each other even after an account has been submitted to writing.[24] Spoken and written criticism represented different forms of expression geared to specific audiences, and although they could inspire one another, they also remained separate entities.

As well as permitting a broader audience to be reached more rapidly, oral report constituted a dangerous political force because of its erratic nature. Rumours proliferated in the unstable political environment of the period, indicating that cases of seditious speech comprise only a fraction of the political discussion that took place in the realm. Contemporary vernacular chronicles often record these rumours and their impact as evidence of popular dissatisfaction and its destabilising effects. In some instances, the chroniclers also record cases of seditious speech, permitting the opinions expressed in indictments to be placed within a wider arena of protest. Yet although the chronicles are constructed as records of events, their observations about popular disaffection are inseparable from their interpretation of the events that inspire them. As such, the chronicles participate in the politics surrounding popular complaint by engaging in political discussion and attempting to shape belief. The fact that both chroniclers and seditious speakers employ the same principles of deduction and persuasion indicates the fluid environment within which the political dimensions of language were mediated.

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[22] See, for instance, Scase, 'Strange and Wonderful Bills', and John Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century*, (London: Blandford Press, 1971).
[23] Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry*; Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 77; Charles Ross, 'Rumour, Propaganda and Popular Opinion during the Wars of the Roses', in *Patronage, the Crown, and the Provinces in Later Medieval England*, ed. R. A. Griffiths, (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1981), p. 16. Ross's notion that written reports provide 'clear and irrefutable' evidence attributes them a fixity of meaning that does not admit the varieties of interpretation that they might be subject to. Likewise, Harvey's argument that the rhetoric heard in a number of popular rebellions in the period was 'drawn from popular metrical verse' overlooks the possibility that writing and speaking about popular politics was reciprocal; see *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 155 n.110 and p. 171 n.170.
[24] Chris Wickham, 'Gossip and Resistance among the Medieval Peasantry', *Past and Present* 160 (1998), pp. 15, 24.

This chapter examines how the political status of opprobrious language was tested as the boundaries of what could and could not be said shifted. It is the varying responses generated by the application, negotiation, and reception of the political status of seditious speech and rumour that is addressed here. The first section examines how indictments for seditious speech identify the growth of a popular political consciousness with ideas about treasonable language. The second section then examines how cases of seditious speech were represented in contemporary vernacular chronicles, considering the different interpretative strategies employed and the range of opinions that arose as a result. Finally, the role of rumour in the expression and dissemination of popular politics is assessed, exploring the contrasting ways in which popular complaint produced and shaped group beliefs.

3.1 Politicising language

Studies of mid-fifteenth-century politics have typically acknowledged only the speech recorded in indictments as worthy of attention, and even then, have disagreed about its value. Harvey's treatment of the indictments as faithful records of widespread popular political beliefs is offset by Storey's argument that they may only represent the views of isolated or prejudiced individuals.[25] Attempts to elaborate upon these arguments by establishing the political attitudes of the common people are also divided. Griffiths's assessment of the petition produced during the Cade Revolt argues that the rebels' conservatism meant that 'it stopped short of making truly treasonable utterances'.[26] Yet the rebels that participated in the regional risings that followed in the aftermath of the revolt proclaimed far more radical beliefs that test the notion of popular conservatism. Mavis Mate's study of the Sussex rising during the Easter week of 1451 shows that the rebels not only expressed hostility to the king, but were visionary in their proposed reform, declaring that they intended 'to depose the king, to kill all the lords (spiritual and temporal), and to appoint twelve of their own men to rule the land'.[27] What is significant here, however, is not so much whether the people

[25] Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 31; Storey, *End of the House of Lancaster*, p. 35.
[26] Ralph A. Griffiths, *The Reign of Henry VI: The Exercise of Royal Authority, 1422-1461*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 634-5.
[27] Mavis Mate, 'The Economic and Social Roots of Medieval Popular Rebellion: Sussex in 1450-1451', *Economic History Review* 45 (1992), pp. 664, 667.

were either conservative or radical in their political protest but how they could command different political identities, and how these were received. As such, it is important to note how cases of transgressive speech are constructed and presented. Doing so provides insight into how the political status of the reported language was developed and exploited by both the indicted speaker and the official account. Using evidence from eighteen King's Bench indictments from the period 1440-1453, this section explores how indictments partook in and responded to linguistic politics.

Any study of indictment evidence must acknowledge its shortcomings. Indictments were made by a jury of twelve laymen who represented their local community and were sworn to enquire upon the king's behalf into the offence. The accusations they heard were based upon articles derived either directly from the knowledge of the jury (presentments), or from a bill provided by a third party. If certified to be true, the indictments were either drawn up by the crown lawyers or the jury, submitted to a commission of the peace, and then forwarded to the King's Bench for judgment. The format of indictments was rigid, demanding the name of the accused, the date and place of the offence, and the nature of the offence, presented in precise wording and standard legal formulae.[28] This strict arrangement gives the indictments the illusion of being straightforward accounts of popular political outbursts, but their simplicity is complicated by a number of issues. Indictments for seditious speech place particular emphasis upon the words that were allegedly spoken, recording them in either English or Latin. Those indictments that employ English notation give the illusion of accuracy and a sense of the perceived significance of the words.[29] Yet even when apparently reported verbatim, it is impossible to ascertain the degree of paraphrasing or embellishment that may be included. Fabrication of the accusations was also possible, with indictments being made as part of ongoing feuds,

[28] The summary of indictment procedure is taken from Roger Virgoe, 'Some Ancient Indictments in the King's Bench referring to Kent, 1450-2', in *Documents Illustrative of Medieval Kentish Society*, ed. F. R. H. Du Boulay, (Ashford: Headley Brothers, 1964), pp. 214-5.

[29] The use of English in depositions could also indicate the illiteracy of the accused. In the unusual case of Robert Groodgrome of Ospringe in Kent in 1440, he specifically requested that he make his lengthy statement in the vernacular because he did not understand Latin or French; see Margaret Aston, 'A Kent Approver of 1440', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 36 (1963), 82-90, and Storey, *House of Lancaster*, pp. 199-209. The influence of administrative shifts towards the use of the vernacular may also have been influential in some cases. In his study of London's later medieval church courts, Richard Wunderli observes that, from the 1490s, scribes became more precise in their wording of depositions and began to use English to record defamatory accusations in order 'to provide a sharply defined basis for litigation'; *London Church Courts and Society on the Eve of the Reformation*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Medieval Academy of America, 1981), p. 78.

or identifying known troublemakers. Likewise, approvers – felons who became informants to avoid execution – often provided the evidence for indictments, and were no doubt motivated more by personal interest than concern for the common good.

Indeed, the very notion of prosecuting speech as treason says as much about the fears of the ruling elite as it does about popular extremism. In the unsettled political climate of the mid-fifteenth century, any statement of discontent or unconventional remark about the king or his ministers might be regarded as subversive. Because treason was defined by the intention to kill the king, it is unsurprising that the majority of the indictments involve claims that the king should either be killed or deposed. However, from the different propositions offered abut how to accomplish the king's removal, and the variety of other accusations made, it should be understood that each case was not simply moulded to fit a standard prototype. Along with hoping for the king's imminent expiration, deficiencies in Henry's character and mental state were derided: men claimed that the king was mad; he was unfit to be king; he looked and acted like a child; he was more like a sheep than a monarch.[30] Wrapped up in all of these judgments was an understanding of what a good king should be. As Wolffe observes, compounding Henry's failings was the all too obvious contrast between the inadequate figure of Henry VI and the victorious icon of his father.[31] Having successfully established the dual monarchy of England and France whilst maintaining order in the kingdom, Henry V had fulfilled the criteria of an ideal ruler. His achievements were strategically publicised to promote public support and reinforce the Lancastrian claim to the throne.[32] When his son's repeated requests for subsidies failed to prevent the loss of the French lands, the financial and psychological pressure exerted upon the people merged with their understanding of

[30] A list of the indictments covered in this chapter is given in Appendix 3, and are grouped by subject in Appendix 4.
[31] Wolffe, *Henry VI*, p. 18. See also the poem incorporated into *Hardyng's Chronicle* which praises Henry V and then exhorts his son to follow his example, Charles L. Kingsford, 'Extracts from the First Version of *Hardyng's Chronicle*', *English Historical Review* 27 (1912), pp. 744-5, 749.
[32] On the propaganda produced to publicise the dual monarchy, see Griffiths, *Reign of Henry VI*, p. 219, and J. W. McKenna, 'Henry VI and the Dual Monarchy: Aspects of Royal Political Propaganda, 1422-1432', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 28 (1965), 145-62. On the techniques used to publicise and generate support for the war with France in the fourteenth century, see J. R. Maddicott, 'The County Community and the Making of Public Opinion in Fourteenth-Century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, fifth series, 28 (1978), 27-43.

monarchical duties.[33] Even if the claims made in the indictments were fabricated, the fact that they could be considered plausible means that they must agree with the disgruntled talk that was taking place in the realm.

Another indicator that the indictments correlated with actual popular political discussion is their geographical spread. In the period 1440-1453, accusations of seditious speech were reported from ten counties across southern, central and eastern England, matching the areas where popular risings occurred in this period.[34] As Harvey observes:

> What strikes one about these charges is that the same kind of thing was being said (or being said that it was said) all over the country. The constant underlying theme of such speech was that men simply did not regard Henry as fit to be king.[35]

In expressing their dissatisfaction, these individuals showed that their political visions were not restricted by deference to the monarch. Their complaints no longer centred upon contesting feudal rights as they did in 1381,[36] but instead focused directly upon the monarch himself. As 'the personification of the unity of the realm and of all due order in society', criticising the monarch was highly exceptional and extremely dangerous.[37] Claims of misgovernance were traditionally deflected towards the king's ministers, even when it was evident that the monarch was at fault. A monarch could be deposed if they posed a destructive threat to the realm, as in the cases of Edward II and Richard II, but justifying the act was fraught with difficulties.[38] Although the people generally did not think outside of these central political values, they did not determine the people's expectations to the extent that they were oblivious to whether

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[33] On the impact of the loss of France upon the common people, see D. McCulloch and E. D. Jones, 'Lancastrian Politics, the French War, and the Rise of the Popular Element', *Speculum* 58 (1983), 95-138.

[34] Of the 18 indictments consulted, 4 were from London, 4 from Kent, 2 from Suffolk and 2 from Sussex, and 1 each from Berkshire, Cambridgeshire, Gloucestershire, Lincolnshire, Middlesex, and Norfolk. These results show that cases of seditious speech were either closely associated with popular discontent in the south-east of England, or were more keenly prosecuted in the counties nearest the capital.

[35] Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 31.

[36] See particularly Rosamond Faith, 'The 'Great Rumour' of 1377 and Peasant Ideology', in *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. R. H. Hilton, and T. H. Aston, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 43-73.

[37] Wolffe, *Henry VI*, p. 16.

[38] John L. Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 263-4.

the political system was functioning effectively or not. By directing these political discourses back at the government in demands for redress, they became more than just reactionary outbursts. By drawing a definite and uncompromising distinction between the office of kingship and the inadequacy of the person who filled it, those who spoke out against the king were using their political awareness to say what the authorities could not. It is in this sense that their outbursts fulfil the treasonable status that was attributed to them.

The development of this political language also arose as a result of social and economic changes. As Harvey has argued, the fifteenth century possessed a unique social environment where social groups merged and overlapped as a result of the demographic changes brought about by the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century. Groups that occupied the upper levels of the peasantry enjoyed particular benefits, gaining in wealth and position and becoming increasingly literate.[39] Over half of the indictments for seditious speech made between 1440 and 1453 name the speakers as yeomen, husbandmen, or artisans. Members of these social groups have also been identified as frequent participants in the popular uprisings of the period. Explanations for this occurrence have focused upon the rebels' occupations, and in particular, involvement in the cloth industry. Hare, Harvey, and Mate have all identified cloth workers as participants in the Wiltshire, Kent, and Sussex risings of 1450-1.[40] Both Harvey and Mate follow traditional arguments that the political radicalism of the trade was derived from heterodox associations.[41] However, although heresy was often present in areas where the cloth trade flourished, it does not follow for every area.[42] Likewise, an economic downturn in the 1440s may have impacted negatively upon these prosperous producers and exacerbated grievances about national politics, but it does not explain why these peasant groups as a whole were so politically involved.[43]

[39] Harvey, 'Popular Politics', p. 159. For an overview of how the social positions of yeomen and husbandmen altered in the late medieval period, see Maurice Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages, 1348-1500*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), pp. 68-9.
[40] J. N. Hare, 'The Wiltshire Risings of 1450: Political and Economic Discontent in Mid-Fifteenth Century England', *Southern History* 4 (1982), pp. 16-7.
[41] Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 26; Mate, 'Economic and Social Roots', p. 669.
[42] Hare, 'Wiltshire Risings', p. 26; Robert G. A. Lutton, *Lollardy and Orthodox Religion in Pre-Reformation England: Reconstructing Piety*, (Woodbridge: Royal Historical Society, 2006), p. 181.
[43] Hare, 'Wiltshire Risings', p. 18. On the economic 'slump' experienced in England from the 1440s to the 1470s, see Mate, 'Economic and Social Roots', pp. 661-3, 668-9, 674, and John Hatcher, 'The

Rather than possessing an innate radical outlook, it may be that the transforming social status of these groups not only increased their desire for integration in their local community but also bred particular social and political concerns.[44] Harvey has identified the authors of the Cade petition as the forty-shilling freeholders, those merchants, wealthy artisans, and aspiring yeomen who were beneath the gentry, but who could vote, were literate, and 'had a political stake in the county and took an active role in its administration'.[45] In addition, members of the peasantry often held local offices, such as petty officials and jurors, which brought them into the county court and familiarised them with common law and national politics.[46] Such positions not only involved a cross-section of local society in the intrigues of local politics but also brought them into contact with information about national politics, in the form of newsletters and personal correspondence as well as oral reports from outside visitors, which permitted them to forge opinions and discuss them with their peers. Although these middling groups adopted the political language of their superiors, their feelings that they were being compromised by the king's ineffectiveness may well have led them to discuss their discontent with their peers.[47] It is the probability that these networks underlay cases of seditious speech that made the authorities so anxious to silence speakers, for as Strohm observes: 'such networks and chains of informal talk weave a consensus, a view so 'commonly held' as to constitute proof and a basis for political action'.[48]

Mid-fifteenth-century indictments rarely provide direct evidence of the wider concerns that seditious speech raised. Couched in standard legal rhetoric, their focus upon the individual speaker isolates their speech, downplaying the possibility that the

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Great Slump of the Mid-Fifteenth Century', in *Progress and Problems in Medieval England: Essays in Honour of Edward Miller*, ed. Richard H. Britnell and John Hatcher, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 237-72.

[44] Lutton, *Lollardy and Orthodox Religion*, pp. 180, 185-6.

[45] Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, pp. 105-6. On the prominence of local tensions in popular uprisings, see Harvey's detailed account of the injustices practised in Kent and which were represented in the rebels' petition, pp. 32-52, and Hare's observations about local tensions in Salisbury, 'Wiltshire Risings', p. 21.

[46] Mate, 'Economic and Social Roots', pp. 674-5; Christopher Dyer, 'The Political Life of the Fifteenth-century English Village', in *The Fifteenth Century IV*, ed. Clark and Carpenter, pp. 139-43, 155; Maddicott, 'County Community', p. 30.

[47] On the networks established between yeomen in the urban environment, see Elisabeth E. Salter *Cultural Creativity in the Early English Renaissance: Popular Culture in Town and Country*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 56-7.

[48] Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, p. 25.

ideas expressed were mutually held. Yet comparison of these records with cases from the fourteenth century shows that the vocabulary used to present these cases altered. Ralph Hanna's study of the case of John Shirley in 1381 emphasises how his representation accorded with contemporary social concerns. Shirley is cast as a wandering 'vagabond' who spreads 'lies, evil words, threats and worthless talk' across the country, echoing the concerns of the Statute of Labourers and the fears of popular disturbance raised by his indifference for established principles of governance. That Shirley made his subversive announcements in the tavern only reinforces his depravity, being a popular location demonised by sermons for its associations with overindulgence and moral laxity. The result is that Shirley is figured within 'a discursive formation about the lower classes' that establishes him as a deviant minor and reinforces official authority.[49] The capacity for official discourse to subvert popular expression likewise occurs in the chronicle accounts of the Peasants' Revolt, where the rebel voice is reduced to animal cries and incoherence. Yet as Hanna also observes, by depicting any dissenting voice as liable to the destruction of official harmony, the power to make such utterances remains a constant destabilising force beneath any assertion of order.[50]

In the changing social climate of the fifteenth century, it appears that this underlying threat rose much closer to the surface. Clearly the assertive political attitudes of the peasantry had always been acknowledged, but with their changing social and political status, depicting their activism as a deviant activity became less straightforward. The frequent identification of upwardly-mobile peasants as speakers of seditious language recognises both the manifestation of their political consciousness and the impact it had upon the integrity of official political discourses.[51] Such is made apparent in the case of the Merfeld brothers of Sussex,

[49] Ralph Hanna, 'Pilate's Voice/ Shirley's Case', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 91 (1992), pp. 795-8.
[50] *Ibid.*,pp. 800-2.
[51] Although indictments for seditious speech were not limited to peasants and middling groups, it is possible that the authorities attributed seditious speech a particular social status. According to Shannon McSheffrey, artisans were often suspected of heresy and feature prominently in heresy trials; *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities, 1420-1530*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. 69. Likewise, in the period 1558-1625, 86% of prosecutions for sedition involved individuals of yeoman status or below. In contrast, defamation cases brought before the Jacobean Star Chamber show that the gentry represent the majority of plaintiffs and defendants. Defending one's name was a different matter from slander that was considered treasonable, perhaps indicating that those of lower social status had less to lose in making these claims. See Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, p. 309 n. 16 and p. 339, n. 5.

who were indicted in 1450. Unlike John Shirley in 1381, their language is afforded direct political significance rather than simply being described:

> John Merfeld of Brightlyng in the shire of Sussex husbondman and William Merfeld of Brightlyng in the shire forseid husbondman at Brightlyng in the opyn market the sonday in the feste of seynt Anne the xxviij yer of our seide souereyn lord falsly seide that the kyng was a naturell fooll and wolde ofte tymes holde a staff in his handes with a brid on the ende pleyng therwith as a fooll and that the kyng was no person able to rule the land.
> Also the seide Iohn at Brightling the sonday next afore seynt lukes day the xxix yer of our seide souerayn lord the kyng in the opyn alehouse \falsely/ seide to William Burford (senior) that the Chartor that \our/ seide souerayn lord made of the first inssureccion was fals and he also.
> Also the seide Iohn at Brightyng on seynt annes evyn the xxviij jer aboueseid \falsely/ seide that he and his felawchyp wolde arise aȝen and whan they were vp they wolde leue no Gentilmen alyve but such as theym list to haue.[52]

Opprobrious language was both spoken and performed by the Merfelds. The husbandmen's dramatic parody of the king's foolishness was publicly staged and may have been mimed to emphasise his folly. Not only does their caricature denigrate the ceremonial authority of kingship, but the site of its performance 'in the opyn market' accentuates its subversive connotations. Because royal proclamations were often read in the marketplace, the Merfelds' declaration represents an appropriation of official channels of communication. That John Merfeld's second seditious statement was made 'in the opyn alehouse' continues this trend, not so much by locating him within the same deviant domain as Shirley, but by stressing the 'opyn', public contexts of these environments. It is not just the requisition of these spaces as forums outside of official control that is at issue here, but the Merfelds' intention to use them to disseminate their beliefs.[53] The construction of the indictment attempts to counteract the impact of the brothers' hazardous assertions by introducing them with the phrase 'falsely seide'. Yet the fact that the word 'falsely' is inserted in the second and third

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[52] NA KB9/122, m. 28 (1450, Sussex). A transcript of the case is provided by R. F. Hunnisett, 'Treason by Words', *Sussex Notes and Queries* 14 (1954-57), 120. Mate wrongly identifies the Merfelds as yeomen; 'Economic and Social Roots', pp. 664, 675.

[53] There is an apparent difference here between those individuals who discussed popular politics within their own homes and those who attempted to broadcast their views. For an example of seditious speech made in a domestic location, see the case of John Page, a draper from London, who was reported to have pronounced his seditious views whilst in the house of Richard Hykysson. NA KB9/260, m. 85 (1446, Suffolk). Harvey notes the different locations where political discussion could take place in 'Popular Politics', p. 160.

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instances appears as if it were an afterthought. The need to stress the fallacy of the Merfelds' claims above and beyond the stringent legal rhetoric of the indictment reveals an unusual anxiety to avoid any suspicion of collusion or sympathy with the views expressed.

Unlike the case of John Shirley, the account of the Merfelds' seditious speech does not set out to undermine their vocal capacity but to confront its destabilising potential. As well as acknowledging the increasing political presence of husbandmen like the Merfelds, the fact that the record was made in English rather than Latin may offer a further indication of why the presentation of indictments altered. With the increasing use of English in administrative documents and a growing vernacular readership, a distinction between official language and seditious expression could no longer rely upon basic social distinctions. This does not mean that indictments that include English notation record the alleged speech with greater reliability, but that they can be witnessed engaging directly with the political status of opprobrious language. As with the case of the Merfelds, the insertions made in the record show how the politicisation of speech complicated how acceptable and unacceptable language was perceived and differentiated. What the homogenised presentation of indictments masks is how perceptions of opprobrious language could vary. In a period when popular discontent was rife, it can only be surmised how many cases of seditious speech went unreported. Although some speakers were indicted by those they shared their opinions with, this does not necessarily mean that there was a strict divide between those who supported the government and those who criticised it. Some individuals felt more strongly than others on particular issues, while in some cases it may not have been the speech itself that was at issue but simply the time and place in which it was made. It is more appropriate that the opinions represented in indictments are considered as part of a range of ideas, where the speaker's alleged articulation of their personal views was either a response to popular opinion or an attempt to influence it.

The factors that influenced the formation of these opinions were diverse and variable, merging existing discourses with local conditions and external pressures. In the case of William Parker from Middlesex in 1448, it is possible to see from his

indictment how spontaneous the process could be. According to Richard Spencer who indicted Parker:

> on Saturday that now last was ther come hidder to me a strong felon which entendeth to robbe the right excellent and mighty Prince Duke of Suffolk at which tyme that he was wyth me y required one William Parker of kyngestrete to areste the seid stronge felon in our soueraigne lordes half now regynyng naturall kynge of Engelond and of Fraunce than the seid William Parker as felon and traytour to oure seid liege lord answered and said that hit is grete pyte that euer oure soueraigne lord now regynyng shuld be kynge other regne for this that he ocupieth hym not in Werres beyond the see and seech that hee is in oure soueraign lord alonge that ther are so many traytourys and felons in England as are this.[54]

Although the account presents Parker's outburst as a straightforward act of defiance, his reasons for making it are more subtle than first appear. Having been called to arrest the felon under Spencer's detainment, Parker's refusal to arrest him apparently contradicts his consequent lament about the king's unwillingness to tackle disorder. Yet what appears to have overturned Parker's principles is that the felon had intended to rob the Duke of Suffolk. As the alleged author of the king's peace policy in the war with France, his association may well have called to mind Parker's dissatisfaction with the king's passive approach in his foreign policy: 'that he occupieth hym not in Werres beyond the see'. Parker was apparently prepared to forego the arrest in the belief that that the planned crime was actually an act of justice for the country. What the case reveals is not so much the inversion of official principles in the enunciation of these defiant views, but the establishment of an intermediate thought domain where the nature and implementation of these principles could be discussed and potentially redefined.

Despite the indictments' purpose to establish a charge of seditious speech, what these accounts often depict is an intermingling of perspectives. They incorporate the alleged voice of the deviant speaker, the voice of the indicter, sometimes additional evidence from the jury, and the structuring of the account by court officials. The tensions that might arise from this construction are strongly represented by a case of seditious speech from Chichester in 1441. According to the mayor, John Sherar,

[54] NA KB9/ 260, m. 87 (1448, Middlesex).

and John Hilly, chief bailiff of the city, Thomas atte Wode, a local butcher, indicted Robert Seman, a tanner, for his seditious speech in an extraordinary performance before the court. Upon entering the courtroom,

> He immediately asked to be allowed to speak and be heard for the lord king and this was granted. When silence had been obtained Thomas burst forth in English against Robert Seman, who is named in the writ, saying: 'I seye that Robyn Seman ys a fals Traitour to the king and that I shal make good upon his body.' Hearing this, we associated with us John Novyngton and Richard Marchall, the king's coroners of the city, and on behalf of the lord King ordered Thomas to declare before us and the coroners all the treasons and other things which by artifice, fraud or evil design might result in injury to the crown or be to the prejudice of the King, and which he denounced in Robert. Then Thomas before us and the coroners uttered these words in the same tongue: 'Robyn Seman the kyngis Traitour seide to me that that kyng oure soverain lord was no kyng ne noon sholde be and þat sholde be knowne in short tyme.' Asked by us of the day, year and place of Robert's words, he replied in the same tongue: 'Robyn seide the wordis to me the moneday next after seynt George day twelvemonethe that last was at Chichester in an hosterie called the Tabard.' Questioned further by us why he had concealed such wicked treasonable words for so long, he replied in the same tongue: 'I have not kept hem privee but opened hem diversely.' Asked if he wished to say anything more before the lord King, he replied: 'I wyl sey no more at this tyme til I come to my kyngys presence and thenne I shal seye more.'[55]

The dramatic reconstruction of Thomas atte Wode's accusations is notable in both its detail and the focus it places upon the butcher as the informant. On the surface, atte Wode's claims appear conventional. His desire to reveal Seman's treasonous words in order to 'make good upon his body' reinforces traditional codes of public punishment that revealed and manifested misdemeanour. Yet his justification for delaying his indictment for a year raises unsettling questions. In admitting to having 'opened hem diversely', it appears that atte Wode had been gossiping freely about Seman's alleged seditious words, to the possible effect of having propagated the subversive statements. Thomas atte Wode's secretive attitude clearly made him suspicious in the eyes of the officials, and it is unsurprising that following the arrest of both parties, Seman was released without charge while atte Wode's fate is unknown.

[55] Hunnisett, 'Treason by Words', pp. 117-8. NA KB9/237, m. 23 (1441, Sussex).

Even before this judgment, however, the presentation of the account makes it quite clear that atte Wode was distrusted. The profile of the officials' process in questioning atte Wode is accounted meticulously, emphasising each point in his allegation so that he is depicted as prominently as the accused. As with the Merfelds' case, the procedure used to recount the case pays particular account to language. Nearly all of atte Wode's remarks are introduced with the acknowledgment that they were made 'in the same tongue', that is, that they were spoken in English. The switch from Latin to vernacular in the account privileges atte Wode's testimony, and at the same time, singles him out for attention. Such deliberate structuring reorients atte Wode's position from reporter to probable author, revealing the officials' belief that he was the actual suspect in the case. Nevertheless, what this neat inversion fails to mask is that in the sheer act of constructing and timing his accusations, atte Wode was asserting his ability to manipulate the legal system through the power of his speech. Although the account attempts to counter such subversion, the potential remained for any member of the public with a basic knowledge of the legal system to undertake a similar perversion. By making opprobrious language a treasonable offence, the capacity to deploy slander for political purposes was transformed into a hazardous, but extremely potent, weapon. Atte Wode's endeavour to exploit the seditious status of opprobrious language is part of the wider social interest in determining the capacity of the vernacular as a political medium. His case may provide an abnormally direct example of the political and ideological exchanges that underlay indictments for seditious speech, but it is probable that this is the untold story behind the straightforward narratives preserved by many cases.

3.2 Interpreting seditious speech

The reconstruction of seditious speech in official records makes it difficult to assess the impact of the language beyond the courtroom. Many cases were limited in their audience, but some were rendered more conspicuous because the speakers sought a mass public or confronted the king directly. In these instances, the speaker's actions and words achieved widespread notoriety as they were widely discussed. Moreover, the punishments that these individuals received were public and highly symbolic, being conducted with the intention that they would exemplify their misdemeanour and dissuade popular sympathy. Some contemporary vernacular

chronicles include accounts of these events, testifying to the impression that they made upon the popular imagination. The accounts typically place greater emphasis upon the punishment afforded to seditious speakers than the nature of the words spoken. Because many of the chronicles were either composed by members of the civic elite or owned by individuals of elite social status, Antonia Gransden has regarded their contents as an expression of elite values.[56] Considered accordingly, accounts of the punishment of seditious speech are reinforcements of the authorities' ability to oversee these sentences and combat the deleterious effects of opprobrious language.

Yet although the chronicles uphold the values of their readers, the material that is included in their accounts and the way that they present it varies according to the individual perspectives of each chronicler. Consequently, attitudes towards incidents of seditious speech are not entirely uniform, being treated as part of the wider interpretative scheme or personal interest of each chronicler. In some instances, these narrative formations are concerned to elucidate particular events or persuade the audience of a certain explanation, while in others they form part of a general commentary on the social and political climate of the period. However, even though each chronicle expresses an individual interpretative design, this should not obscure the fact that their information was often derived from a mixture of sources, ranging from personal experience to rumour. In drawing upon a range of source material, chronicles not only preserve the impressions of a minority, but participate in a much broader arena of political discussion. Cases of seditious speech provide an example of how political opinions were mediated, with accounts of its suppression being offset by those which acknowledge the public concerns that generated it. Comparison of these accounts shows how perceptions of seditious speech in the mid-fifteenth century were interlinked with issues about the expression of political ideas across society.

Of all of the chronicles, the version of the *Brut* contained in Trinity College, Cambridge, MS 0.9.1 offers the most detailed accounts of cases of seditious speech. The *Brut* was extremely popular in the fifteenth century, spawning a number of continuations and providing the basis for many of the London chronicles. Its

[56] Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, II: c.1307 to the Early Sixteenth Century*, (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 222, 242.

popularity derived from its nationalistic presentation of British history, being derived from the Brutus legend and employing a chivalric tone that appealed to the aristocracy.[57] The treatment of opprobrious speakers takes a distinctly moderate approach, graphically recounting their punishment in order to re-establish the equilibrium contravened by their language. Juliana Quick's confrontation with the king in 1443 over the arrest of Eleanor Cobham, the wife of the Duke of Gloucester, provides a prominent example of this construction.[58] Incensed by the Duchess's arrest on charges of witchcraft and plotting to kill the king two years previously, it was claimed that:

> the woman of Kent þat met with the Kyng at þe Blak-Heth in Kent, and spake to hym boldly, and reviled hym vngoodly and vnwisely for Dame Alianore Cobham, þat he shuld haue hir hoom ageyn to hir husband, the Duke of Gloucestre. And with these wordes the Kyng wexe wroth, and toke it to hert; and she was arested and brought into prison by the lawe, and so broght to Westminster afore the Iusticeȝ of the Kynges Benche. And þere she was repreved for hir vngodly langage, and fole-hardynesse to speke so to hir liege lorde, the Kyng. And she ansuered not, bot asked the Kynges grace. And fro þat day she was put vp ageyn in the Kynges Benche till Wednesday next, and then she was brought ageyn to Westminster afore the Iustices. And when she was examined, she wold not speke ne ansuere; and þerfore þe Iustices gafe hir dome, þat she shuld stand in a cart vpright, from the Kynges Benche, and so thurgh London, þat all peple might se hir, with a paupire about hir hede, of hir proude and lewed langage þat she had spoke and shewed to þe Kyng. And so she was caryed ageyn þurgh London and Suthwerk, in þe same Cart, tyll she come to þe Blak-Heth þere she seide these wordes vnto þe King; and then was caryed ageyn to Suthwerk, and delyuerd ageyn to þe kepers of the Kynges Benche, for to haue hir Iugement as þe Iuge had ordeyned it for her offence forto lay as moche yron vpon hir body till she be deed: and thus she ended in this world, for hir proude langage to hir Kyng and souerayn lord.[59]

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[57] *Ibid.*, p. 222. Raluca Radulescu has argued that the nationalistic outlook of chronicles like the *Brut* was prized by high-status families who asserted their genealogy alongside them to assert their position and pedigree amid the instability of the period; 'Writing Nation: Shaping Identity in Medieval Historical Narratives', in *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture, c. 1350-c.1500*, ed. Peter Brown, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 362. For studies of the *Brut*, see William Marx and Raluca L. Radulescu, eds. 'Readers and Writers of the Prose *Brut Chronicle*', special issue of *Trivium* 36 (2006); L. M. Matheson, *The Prose Brut: The Development of the Middle English Chronicle*, (Tempe, Arizona: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998).

[58] Of the indictments covered here, Juliana Quick is the only woman to have been indicted for seditious speech. McIntosh likewise observes that the increasing attention paid to backbiting in the period did not isolate women as the culprits; 'Finding Language', p. 95.

[59] *The Brut or the Chronicles of England*, part II, ed. F. W. D. Brie, EETS o.s. 136, (1908), pp. 483-4.

Juliana's manner of speech is clearly privileged above her actual accusations. The opprobrious character of Juliana's words is particularly emphasised: it is 'proude and lewed langage', having been 'vngoodly and vnwisely' made in accordance with her 'fole-hardynesse'. What makes her speech even more exceptional is that her presumption in challenging the king is offset by her repeated refusal to answer for her crime during her trial. A gesture that was initially marked for its audacity recedes into stubbornness, marking an obdurate nature. By realising Juliana's character in this way, the narrative upholds her gruesome punishment as a fitting outcome of her obstinacy.

In stressing the appropriateness of Juliana's fate, the *Brut* places a unique emphasis upon her punishment. The only other chronicle account of the event is contained in BL MS Cotton Cleopatra C IV, which simply records that:

> in this same yere whas a mad woman i-pressed to [the deth]; ffor sche had spokyn ungodly, and to presumptuously unto oure liege lord the kyng at the blak heth; and whan sche whas brought a fore the juge sche wolde not speke a [word], for the wich obstinesey sche whas put to deth as y have rehersed before.[60]

The truncation of the Cleopatra account indicates that the *Brut* chronicler was working to a different interpretative agenda, where it was necessary to stress that Juliana's outburst was concerned with the Duchess of Gloucester. Eleanor Cobham's trial and subsequent penance is widely recorded in contemporary chronicles, but is afforded especial attention in the *Brut*.[61] In his account of the events surrounding the Duchess's arraignment, the chronicler frames his presentation with strategic observations about freak weather conditions and the terror they inspired. For instance, following the king's visit to London in 1440

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[60] Charles L. Kingsford, ed., *Chronicles of England*, (Dursley: Alan Sutton, 1977), p. 152.

[61] Accounts of the Duchess of Gloucester's penance are given in the *Brut*, pp. 508-9, 478-82; *Bale's Chronicle*, in *Six Town Chronicles*, ed. R. Flenley, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), p. 115; *Gregory's Chronicle*, in *The Historical Collections of a Citizen of London in the Fifteenth-Century*, ed. J. Gairdner, Camden Society new series 17 (1965), pp. 183-4; *Cleopatra C IV*, pp. 148-9; *Vitellius A XVI*, in Kingsford, *Chronicles of England*, pp. 154-5; the *English Chronicle*, in *An English Chronicle of the Reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI*, ed. John S. Davies, (London: Camden Society, 1856), pp. 57-60. For a critical account of the trial of Eleanor Cobham, see Ralph A. Griffiths, 'The Trial of Eleanor Cobham: An Episode in the Fall of Duke Humphrey of Gloucester', in Griffiths, *King and Country: England and Wales in the Fifteenth Century*, (London and Rio Grande: Hambledon Press, 1991), pp. 233-52.

it hayled, rayned and eke lightned...wherof the peple were sore agast, and aferd of the grete tempest. And so it was spoken emonges the peple, þat þer were som wikked fendes and spirites arered out of helle by coniuracion, forto noy þe peple in the Reame, and to put theym to trouble, dissencion and vnrest. An þen it was knowen þat certeyn clerkes, and women þat ar called 'wicches,' had made theire operacion and theire craft to destroy men and women, or whom they list, vnto deth by theire fals craft and worching. Wherof Dame Alianore Cobham, which was þe Duchesse of Gloucestre, was named principally of these actes and fals dedes forto destroy the Kyng.[62]

Incorporating these phenomena has the effect of transforming Eleanor's Cobham hidden malice into a divine revelation. Moreover, by combining providential manifestations with their popular interpretation, the chronicler is able to draw upon beliefs about the supernatural to authorise his presentation. Indeed, meteorological judgments accompany events right up to the narrative of Juliana Quick's fate, indicating that her support for Eleanor Cobham was intended to be weighed against the apparently incontrovertible evidence of the Duchess's wickedness.[63] Both Eleanor Cobham and Juliana Quick appear from the *Brut*'s accounts to have generated a great deal of public curiosity. Although simply referred to as 'the woman of kent' and 'a mad woman', Juliana's outburst before the king reveals that questions about the treatment of the Duchess of Gloucester may have existed among the people.[64] According to the record of Juliana's trial, she confronted the king when he rode past her on his horse, challenging him to 'ride soberly, [for] thy horse may stumble and break thy neck'. Her ensuing comments savour more of Henry's relationship with his uncle than his wife:

It becometh thee better to ride to thy uncle than that thy uncle should ride to thee: thou wilt kill him as thou hast killed thy mother: send to thy uncle's wife whom thou keepest from him. Thou art a fool, a known fool throughout the whole kingdom of England.[65]

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[62] *Brut*, pp. 477-8.

[63] See, for instance, the abnormal conditions reported after the Duchess completed her penance and was leaving Westminster to be incarcerated on the Isle of Man, and the account of the passage of five thieves from the King's Bench to Tyburn to be executed; *ibid.*, pp. 482-3.

[64] On the politics behind the fall of Eleanor Cobham, see Watts, *Henry VI*, pp. 190-2. As Watts observes, although the Duchess's demise was probably part of the plot to remove the Duke of Gloucester from power, no contemporary chronicles make this link or question the validity of the charges against her (pp. 190-1, n. 290).

[65] *A Selection of Cases from the State Trials*, vol. 1 (1327-1660), ed. J. W. Willis-Bund, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1879), pp. 440-1; Rezneck, 'Constructive Treason by Words', 547, n. 16.

Such provocative claims reveal that the *Brut*'s emphasis upon the fate due to dissident speakers was an attempt to reinforce the unacceptability of seditious comment.

An identical depiction is employed in the presentation of Thomas Carver, a gentleman from Berkshire and bailiff to the abbot of Reading who was indicted for seditious speech in 1444. According to the *Brut*'s account:

> Iohn Kerver of lawe, depraued the Kyng; wherefore he was take and brought before þe Kynges Consayle, and þere examined of his vngodely speche and wordes. And he ansuered, and knowleched hym gilty; wherefore the Kynges Consayle Juged hym to deth as a traytour. And this was his full dome: þat he shuld be ledde ageyn to the towne of Redyng, and drawen and hanged, and let down ageyn all quyk, and then brught ageyn to þe Cite of London, to þe Toure, and from thens drawen to Tyborn galowes, and hanged, and let down ayen all quyk, and then bowayled and quartered, and his bowayls brent, and þen his hede smyt of, and set on London Brigge; and oon quartere to be set vp at Redyng, and the oþer in dyuers townes in þe Reame. And then the Kyng, of his grete grace and mercy, sent in all haste his Charter of pardon of his offence and trespasse þat he had doon ayenst his persone, and so delyuerd hym quyte, and sent hym to redyng in sauf garde.[66]

The significance afforded to Carver's conviction acknowledges the level of popular interest that it aroused. Official anxieties were certainly raised by the case: following the incident, a series of special commissions were implemented to identify and convict potential traitors, beginning with Carver himself. The first commission foundered on a lack of evidence, but the second inquiry under a commission of oyer and terminer secured a 'conviction for imagining Henry's death and for seeking to accomplish it by the incitement of others'.[67] Although issued with a pardon for his execution, Carver still endured a severe punishment that included his being drawn for twenty miles through Berkshire as an example to other dissenters. As Meekings has observed, the *Brut*'s account is not wholly accurate: Carver's name, the dating of his offence to August, the admission of his guilt, and the idea that he was judged by the King's Council and adjudged a traitor, are all contested by the King's Bench records.

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[66] *Brut*, p. 485.

[67] Wolffe, *Henry VI*, pp. 128-9. For a full reconstruction of the trial of Thomas Carver based upon the King's Bench evidence, see C. A. F. Meekings, 'Thomas Kerver's Case, 1444', *English Historical Review* 90 (1975), 331-46. The case is also noted by Storey, *End of the House of Lancaster*, p. 34; Wolffe, *Henry VI*, p. 17, and Bellamy, *Law of Treason*, p. 118.

Confusion may have arisen because of the separate commissions that heard the case, or as Meekings indicates, because of popular gossip about the fate that Carver would be awarded.[68]

Whatever the source of the *Brut*'s account, its emphasis upon upholding the punishment of seditious speakers and suppressing the power of opprobrious language remains clear. The subversive statements that generated Carver's punishment were detailed and are representative of the wider popular political discussion taking place in the realm. According to the official indictment, Carver had heard a sermon preached before the king at the royal court at Abingdon on Palm Sunday on the warning of Ecclesiastes 10:16, 'Woe to thee, O land, why thy king is a child'. According to John Baynard and Thomas Codryngham, both servants of the abbot of Reading, Carver repeated this phrase to them along with the novel additions that it would have been worth £100,000 to the realm if the king had been dead the past twenty years, or even better, had never been born. In addition, the jury claimed that Carver had often said that the dauphin would be a better king than Henry.[69] As Wolffe observes, in order for the sermon to be delivered before the king, it could not have advocated that Henry, who was no longer in his minority in 1444, still had the mind of a child.[70] However, this does not mean that Carver, like other men indicted for seditious speech, did not believe that the king had never outgrown his juvenility. Prompted by his beliefs about Henry's inadequacies as a king, Carver may well have regarded the sermon's text as an accurate indictment of Henry's rule and set out to preach his opinion to others. By omitting these claims in its narrative, the *Brut* seeks to maintain the image of unwavering royal and official control, reinforcing the conservative principles of its elite readers. Yet as the cases of Juliana Quick and Thomas Carver show, drawing distinctions between popular political beliefs and traditional social values necessitated a rigid interpretative scheme.

In comparison, some of the London chronicles treat the same material according to very different perspectives, highlighting the scope of opinion that existed about both verbal criticism and the circumstances that gave rise to it. *Bale's*

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[68] Meekings, 'Thomas Kerver',p. 336.
[69] NA KB9/245, m. 47 (1444, Berkshire).
[70] Wolffe, *Henry VI*, p. 17.

Chronicle, contained in Trinity Dublin MS 509, follows the tradition of the London chronicles in representing the interests of the city oligarchy.[71] It contains three accounts of seditious speech; they are all related more briefly than those given in the *Brut*, but display a distinct interest in what seditious speakers were saying. In the case of Thomas Carver, there is mention of both the words he was accused of and his subsequent pardon, but without the details of his prescribed punishment:

> Item the ffriday the iijth day of august oon Thomas Kerver of Redyng gentilman was jugged to be drawen hanged and quartered for a traytor for seyeng of these wordes Ve regno ubi puer est rex and þe same day he was drawe þurgh þe cite of london ffrom the tour unto the Tybourn and as the roop was on his nek his charter cam from the Kyng and he was saved and cam agen on horsbak þurgh the cite wt glad chier.[72]

Unlike the *Brut*'s rendering, the tone employed here is direct and succinct. There is no judgment of the validity of Carver's assertion or the king's decision to pardon him, evincing a more open and perhaps inquisitive interest. Exactly the same approach is taken in the representation of the cases of Nicholas Jakes and John Ramsey. The charges made against Jakes were downgraded from a conspiracy to overthrow the government to seditious speech because his plans for an insurrection were not fulfilled. Upon this basis, Harvey deduces that the chronicler's statement that in 1450 'a man was jugged and hanged and drawen for woordes that he said ageinst the rule of the lordes' refers to Jakes.[73] An equally brief reference is made to Ramsey, when the chronicler notes: 'Item the Satirday the xxix day of March oon John Ramsey servaunt to a vintner in London was drawe hanged and quartered be cause he seid London shall put þe kyng from his crown'.[74]

The brevity of the accounts given in *Bale's Chronicle* gives them the appearance of simply being second-hand news. However, it is notable that the latter

[71] The attribution of the chronicle's authorship to a notary and civic judge identified as Robert Bale by the Bishop of Ossory is doubtful given that no official records from the period identify anyone of this name as having held office. Flenley, *Six Town Chronicles*, p. 67. For discussion of the authorship and composition of *Bale's Chronicle* and other London chronicles, see Mary-Rose McLaren, *The London Chronicles of the Fifteenth Century: A Revolution in English Writing*, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002).

[72] *Bale's Chronicle*, p. 118.

[73] *Ibid.*, p. 128; Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 66 n. 54.

[74] *Bale's Chronicle*, p. 129. The account of the speech given in the chronicle is close to that recorded in Ramsey's indictment, where it is claimed that four days after Suffolk quit the capital, he went around the streets of Dowgate ward chanting 'By this toun, by this toun, for this array the kyng shall lose his Croune', a refrain that the crowds he drew eagerly repeated (NA KB9/73 m. 1).

two cases, both of which occurred in 1450, are noted as part of an extended series of entries for the years 1449-50 and 1450-1 that reflect the heightened tensions of these years. According to the chronicler, 'the world was so strange that tyme' that in November 1450, it

> was ordeyned in diverse places of the cite cheynes to be drawe awthwart the weyes to kepe þe cite sauf: for peple stode in greet dreed and doubt, for the varaunce betwen the lordes. And a cry was made the seid vj day in þe cite in þe kings name that no maner person shuld speek nor medell of eny mater doon in þe parlement nor of the lordes.[75]

These defensive actions were the direct response of the city's officials to the continuing unrest in the city after Cade's Revolt, as is exemplified by the 'many strange and woundyrfulle bylle[s]' that *Gregory's Chronicle* describes as having been posted around the city at this time.[76] That both bills and speech about political affairs were prohibited by public proclamation reveals the kinds of censorship introduced to curb popular discussion. Considered within this environment, the chronicler's observations about seditious speech expose both his interest in popular comment and the anxiety aroused by the investigation of restricted topics.

Despite these pressures, the nature of the political environment in the period meant that seditious speech not only aroused considerable attention but could also inspire sympathetic consideration. A continuation of a London chronicle contained in Hatfield MS 281 for the years 1446-50 illustrates these sentiments in paying particular attention to cases of seditious speech that occurred in 1450. It echoes the local interests of *Bale's Chronicle* by noting the trials of Nicholas Jakes and John Ramsey that took place in the capital. The account of Jakes's indictment is brief and offers little additional information besides naming him directly: 'on the saterday the last daye of Janeuer in the same yere was oon Nicholas Jakes, a seruant late of Bassingbourne, Squyer, drawen thurgh London to Tibourne and there hanged, beheded and quartered for treason of language'.[77] Ramsey is treated in more detail, including a description of his trial as well as his prescribed punishment:

[75] *Ibid.*, pp. 135-6.
[76] *Gregory's Chronicle*, p. 195.
[77] Charles L. Kingsford, 'An Historical Collection of the Fifteenth Century', *English Historical Review* 29 (1914), p. 514.

> And the xxixth day of March following in þe same yere was oon John Ramsey, an olde poure man, dampned ate Guyldehalle, there sittyng Fortescu, chief Justice, the lord Stourton, and other commissioners, for treson of langage of the Kinges persone, and drawen from the Toure to Tybourne, and there hanged, beheded, and quartered, and þe hede to London Brigge, and þe iiij quarters to diuerse places of Inglond.[78]

What is striking in the account is the chronicler's description of Ramsey as 'an olde poure man'. No comment is made upon the speech that earned his execution, but it appears that the chronicler felt a measure of sympathy for him or compassion for his position. An almost identical stance is taken with regard to William Hill, who 'was committed to the kinges benche for langage, and there lay in prison and dyed for thought and sorwe'.[79] Although this statement could be interpreted as a comment upon Hill's repentance of his treasonable words, in light of the attitude expressed towards John Ramsey, it is more likely that Hill was regarded tragically. Whether these considerations arose from the chronicler's dissatisfaction with the censorship of the times or were a response to contemporary instability like the remarks made in *Bale's Chronicle*, it is notable that the chronicler's distinction between legitimate and illegitimate language drew a different dividing line from the *Brut*.

In producing accounts of seditious speech, these chroniclers were thus engaged in resetting the linguistic boundaries that were broken by opprobrious speakers. The Hatfield chronicler's focus upon cases of treason involving 'language' certainly identifies a special attention beyond a general concern with law and order. It is a focus that not only has implications for the way that the chronicler represents these cases, but also for the way that seditious speech is identified and classified. For instance, in the case of Thomas Cheyne, a distinction is made between the charges of treasonable language and insurrection, even though the latter would have cancelled out the former:

> And in the same yere, that is to sey the sixth day of Feuerer suyng, was oon Thomas Cheyne, which called himself Blewberd and was taken in Kent, drawen, hanged, quartered and beheded at Tibourne for Treson

[78] *Ibid.*, p. 515.
[79] *Ibid.*, p. 515.

in London, that is to sey for langage, and for rising in Kente, and was dampned at Westmynster, and his hede sette on London brigge.[80]

By preserving the separate charges the chronicler may simply have been developing his interest in seditious speech. Yet the name 'Blewberd' also became a watchword among future rebels, forging a tradition of dissent that may have confused the chroniclers' perception of events when they looked back upon them.[81] According to *Bale's Chronicle*, in 'the moneth of Janyver oon calling hym self Queen of the feyre yede into Kent and Essex and did noon oppression nor hurt to any persone', and was followed in February by 'oon calling himself William Blewberd which hadde laboured to have accompanied a greet felawship for to have hadde a rule among the lordes was drawe þurgh the cite and hanged'.[82] Harvey interprets both the names 'Queen of the Fairies' and 'Bluebeard' as relating to Cheyne's revolt, as Cheyne's men also took the names of folk heroes in order to mask their identity.[83] It is difficult to know whether the chronicler was describing two separate revolts or was misled by the different names, but his contradictory opinions show how the unstable political environment confused distinctions between different types of deviance.

Although all of the chroniclers maintain the illusion that they are independent observers distanced from the popular opinions that they describe, their approaches to seditious speech are less clear-cut. This is not to say that any of the chroniclers were supportive of the claims made by seditious speakers or that they did not consider that their words constituted treason. Nevertheless, by observing these cases the chroniclers were compelled not only to consider the politics that gave rise to them, but also to acknowledge how their own accounts were in dialogue with them. Chronicles like the

[80] *Ibid.*, p. 514-5. Harvey describes the course of the revolt and its local as well as national aims in *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, pp. 64-5. The official account of the revolt appears in NA KB9/263 mm. 56, 57 and 58, and NA KB27/755 rex side m.4.

[81] Harvey notes that in October 1450 a group of over a hundred men from Sussex and the Kentish Weald carried out a massive poaching raid on the estates of the duke of Buckingham at Penshurst. They had painted their faces, wore false beards, and called themselves 'servants of the queen of the fairies' in reference to Cheyne's rising in the previous January; *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 138. On the influence of folk drama upon the naming of rebel leaders and the disguises employed in popular uprisings, see Thomas Pettitt, ''Here Comes I, Jack Straw': English Folk Drama and Social Revolt', *Folklore* 95 (1984), 3-20, and Sandra Billington, *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 15-19.

[82] *Bale's Chronicle*, pp. 127-8.

[83] The names included 'the king and queen of the fairies' and 'Robin Hood'; Harvey, *Jack Cade's Revolt*, p. 65. Storey adds that the names 'Jenessay' and 'Harveybynne' were also used, the meanings of which are obscure; *End of the House of Lancaster*, p. 62.

Hatfield continuation and *Bale's Chronicle* particularly identify such an engagement in being contained within commonplace books, where the owner of the manuscript may also have been their author.[84] In compilations like these, the potential to tailor material to suit personal interests means that the chronicles are individualised. As a result, in reading across the chronicles it is possible to discern a range of approaches and shades of opinion that blur straightforward divisions between official and unofficial perceptions of complaint. The interpretative approaches that the chroniclers employ evince their individual political values, but in doing so, they also to some extent fragment the homogeneity of 'official' accounts like the *Brut*. In particular, the fact that some chroniclers were prepared to entertain the legitimacy of popular complaint rendered the division between acceptable and unacceptable speech permeable. Narrative accounts of seditious speech thus reveal the complex impressions it produced in the political climate of the mid-fifteenth century.

3.3 Rumour and popular politics

In assessing the general political impact of opprobrious language, it is important to acknowledge that seditious speech represented extreme views. Nonetheless, although official anxieties may have amplified the dangers of open criticism, there was an increasing awareness of the power commanded by political language in the period. The chronicles indicate that political discussion was widespread, particularly identifying rumour as being involved in the formation and expression of popular political ideas. What differentiates rumour from gossip is that whereas the latter is carried out between associates and involves personal scandal, rumour crosses social groups, relates to public issues, and originates from an unidentified source.[85] More so than cases of seditious speech, the way that rumour is reported in the chronicles varies, being identified as a sign of rebellious intent,

[84] See also *Gregory's Chronicle* (BL Egerton MS 1995) and *Benet's Chronicle* (Trinity Dublin MS 516), both of which form part of commonplace books.

[85] Jean-Noël Kapferer, *Rumors: Uses, Interpretations, and Images*, trans. B. Fink, (London and New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1990), p. 61; R. L. Rosnow and G. A. Fine, *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay*, (New York, Oxford, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1976), p. 4; James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 143-4. On the etymological distinctions between rumour and gossip, see Rosnow and Fine, *Rumor and Gossip*, p. 9. For studies of gossip, see Max Gluckman, 'Gossip and Scandal', *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963), 307-15, and Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).

popular outcry, and evidence of governmental failing. These different impressions are partly due to the variable nature of rumour. Because of its reliance upon oral transmission, alterations and elaborations can be continually woven into a rumour.[86] Consequently, rumours are particularly damaging for authorities who practise censorship, because under times of stress, potentially any rumour, however extreme, is liable to be believed simply because it represents unauthorised information.[87] Moreover, rumours are not only subversive because of the information that they contain, but also because of the way that they express it. As Ethan Shagan observes, 'every person in the chain of a rumour's transmission...participated to some degree in the creation of a popular political discourse'.[88] The ability for rumour to forge and express an independent political language reveals why rumour became such a potent political force in the period.

Although Harvey has acknowledged that rumour was a significant medium for the communication of popular politics in the fifteenth century, the controversies surrounding its expression have been generally overlooked.[89] Rumours facilitate the production of group beliefs because they make sense of difficult circumstances and explain unresolved questions. Yet by producing a common mindset and a shared focus, rumour could instigate as well as mitigate political grievances. The proliferation of rumours identifies the ability of the common people to deploy their growing political consciousness to make more forceful or destabilising gestures based upon group pressure. This assertive capacity was not simply a reactionary response nor was it limited to popular use alone. Rumours could both respond to injustice and perform an injustice by maligning individuals. Official recognition of the growth of popular politics likewise meant that rumours were fabricated in order to generate support. In the chronicles, rumours are recorded as evidence of popular opinion but are also subject to the interpretation of each chronicler. Popular protest is not recorded directly, being categorised according to a scale of oppositional language. By

[86] As Walker argues of the 'false Richard' rumours heard at the outset of Henry IV's reign, what made them so enduring was that they were less a static body of beliefs than a claim that was subject to constant, and sometimes competing, acts of appropriation and accommodation'; 'Rumour, Sedition and Popular Protest', p. 63. The ability of rumours to change, coexist, and openly compete with other (official) versions of stories means that they are not only endlessly variable, but can resurface years after having perceived to be dormant.

[87] Kapferer, *Rumors*, pp. 7, 88

[88] Shagan, 'Rumours and Popular Politics', p. 31.

[89] Harvey, 'Popular Politics?', p. 161.

establishing rumour as being precursory to rebellion, the chroniclers were able to restrict the impact of popular criticism. However, in treating rumours as a subject worthy of notice, the chronicles also affirm the political presence of rumours and their speakers at the same time as they seek to contain them. In consideration of rumour's status as a political language, it is both its representation of contentious issues and its own controversial status that are examined in this section.

For the majority of the common people, it was local rather than national politics that impinged upon their everyday lives. Yet the prevalence of popular disturbances in the mid-fifteenth century makes it clear that concerns arising from national politics increasingly affected the people and shaped their experiences. This is not to say that the people were not politically aware at any other time, but rather that the peculiar circumstances of the period coincided with their enhanced social and economic status in ways that amplified and channelled their self-awareness.[90] As *Bale's Chronicle* observes, it was a period when many things were asked of the people, 'But the cause werfor that hit was the peple knew not'.[91] The prevalent rumours generated by these circumstances indicate that the common people were seeking to understand their situation. Because the chronicles were constructed retrospectively, they are also engaged in the same process of explaining and justifying events. The rumours that the chronicles acknowledge conform to the seven categories of governmental scandal identified by the sociologist, Jean-Noël Kapferer, covering the control of government by an invisible group; secret agreements; money; illness; sex; double talk; and immigration.[92] Kapferer's categories are structured to represent modern society, but as the following analysis shows, fifteenth-century examples deviate little from this model. In particular, conspiracy theories arising from clandestine alliances, imbalances of power, and secret agendas proliferate.

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[90] As Christine Carpenter has observed, there has been a tendency, particularly among early modern historians, to regard the lower social orders simply as the 'excluded'. Consequently, popular political culture is often understood as being divorced from elite culture, and only expressed in the form of deviancy, riot, or rebellion. See Carpenter, 'Introduction: Political Culture, Politics and Cultural History', in *The Fifteenth Century IV: Political Culture in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. L. Clark and C. Carpenter, (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), p. 13. For a recent collection of essays that seek to address this problem, see Harris, ed., *The Politics of the Excluded.*
[91] *Bale's Chronicle*, p. 120.
[92] Kapferer, *Rumors*, pp. 218-21.

One of the most prominent sources of rumour was the death of the king's uncle, the Duke of Gloucester, in 1447. Gloucester was arrested on charges orchestrated by a group of magnates in Henry's council shortly before parliament convened at Bury St Edmunds. His detention was timed to avert his criticisms of the cession of Maine from jeopardising imminent negotiations with France, and prevented him from being appointed as England's custodian when the king left to front these talks.[93] Not all of the chronicles observe the motives behind Gloucester's arrest but instead focus upon his extraordinary death only days after his apprehension. Gloucester's position as Protector and strong involvement with the defence and recovery of French lands made him an extremely popular figure, and the suddenness of his death was deemed both deeply shocking and highly suspicious. According to the chronicles, rumours abounded about how the Duke had died. As the *Great Chronicle* relates:

> this fforsaid noble prynce wtyn vj dayes afftyr his arrest was foundyn deed In his Inne, Of whoos deth many talys were blowyn abowth the land, Soom saying þt he was stuffed atwene ij ffethyr beddis, and soom by the meane of an hoot brennyng spytt threst Into the nethyr part of his body, and soom said he was drownyd In wyne, and afftyr dryd again, But how or In what wyse soo evyr he were put to deth deed he was ffounde, upon whoos sawle & all Crystyn Jhesus have mercy Amen, And when he was thus ffoundyn dede, his Corps was caryed Into thabbay Chyrch, That alle that wold migth see hym, But on his corps might noo wound be seen nor foundyn.[94]

It is the only account to speak expressly of there being 'many talys blowyn abowth the land', a claim that is supported by the number of explanations offered for his death. Of these, the claim that he was 'drownyd In wyne, and afftyr dryd again' is unique, and like the accompanying claims for suffocation between two featherbeds and piercing with a hot skewer, there is an emphasis upon the fantastic. Other chronicles, including the *Brut*, *Vitellius A XVI*, and *Bale's Chronicle*, enhance the extraordinary nature of the affair by reporting alternative versions of the rumour, stating that Gloucester 'died for sorowe' and 'for hevynes'.[95]

[93] See Watts, *Henry VI*, pp. 228-32, for an account of Suffolk's foreign policy that formed the backdrop to the Bury parliament. Griffiths likewise argues that it was Gloucester's hostility to these plans that were behind the orchestration of his arrest and possible murder; *Reign of Henry VI*, p. 497.
[94] *The Great Chronicle of London*, ed. A. H. Thomas and I. D. Thornley, (London: George W. Jones, 1938), p. 179.
[95] *Vitellius A XVI*, p. 157; *Bale's Chronicle*, p. 121.

Speculation about Gloucester's death is typically supplemented with the notice that the public display of the body failed to quell popular suspicion. With a lack of visual evidence to account for the tragedy, rumours were encouraged rather than dispelled. As Watts observes, however, discerning the effect of Gloucester's death upon the general population is problematised because popular opinion is filtered through an awareness of later events.[96] In Wolffe's estimation, comments about Gloucester's death were not recorded until after 1450 because of the volatility of the political environment.[97] Only one case of seditious speech from the period 1440-53 alleged that the Duke was murdered. [98] Yet Juliana Quick's admonishment to Henry that he would kill his uncle indicates that political discussion about Gloucester's position was mounting throughout the 1440s, and no doubt intensified further after 1447. For those chroniclers who were hostile to Henry VI, the escalation of popular discontent about Gloucester's treatment provided a base from which they could legitimise their disaffection. The strong interpretative frame constructed in the continuation of the *Brut* contained in BL Add MS 10099 illustrates this approach. Following the declaration that the Duke's body was unmarked, the account offers a detailed commentary of the event:

> here may men mark what þis world is! this Duke was A noble man & A gret clerk, & had worsshippfully rewled þis reame to þe Kinges behove, & neuer cude be found faute in him, but envy of þame þat wer gouernoures, & had promised þe Duchis of Anges & þerldome of Maign, caused þe destruccion of þis noble man; for thei drad him, þat he wold haue enpesshed þat deliuerance...this began þe trouble in þe reame of Englond for þe deth of þis noble Duke of Gloucestre; & al þe communes of þe reame began forto murmure for it, & were nat contente.[99]

In addition to deploying rumour to highlight the Duke's death, the chronicler also uses the common people's 'murmure' as a sign that support for the government was

[96] Watts, *Henry VI*, p. 231.
[97] Griffiths, *Reign of Henry VI*, p. 499.
[98] According to an approver, the yeoman keeper of Gloucester castle, Henry Colman, had stated that Henry was responsible for his uncle's death, that he would have been a better king than Henry, and that he should have killed the king and queen; NA KB9/256 m. 12 (1447, Gloucestershire). Wolffe argues that Colman's vituperative comments may have arisen because he owed his position to the Duke; *Henry VI*, p. 17.
[99] *Brut*, pp. 512-13.

divided from this point. For the *Brut*, it was not so much the rumours themselves that were of interest, but what they presaged.

Clearly some chroniclers actively sought to create an air of intrigue around Gloucester's death in order to capitalise upon popular unrest. In the *English Chronicle*, the events surrounding the Bury parliament are interpreted as a conspiracy to murder the Duke, the revelation of which is represented as a final dismissal of rumour:

> the whiche parlement was maad only for to sle the noble duke of Gloucestre, whoȝ deth the fals duke of Suffolk William de la Pole, and ser Jameȝ Fyneȝ lord Say, and othir of thair assent, hadde longe tyme conspired and ymagyned. And they sayng that thay myȝt not sle him be no trewe meneȝ of iustiȝe ne of lawe, and enfourmed falsli the king, and sayde that he wolde reise the Walshemenne forto distresse him and destroie him; and ordeyned that euery lord sholde come to the said parlement in thair best array and with strengthe. And alle the weyeȝ aboute the said toun off Bury, be commaundement of the said duke of Suffolk, were kept with gret multitude of peple of the cuntre, waking day and nyghte; unknowing the said peple wherefore it was: and the wedir was so cold that some of the poer peple that there waked, deide for cold...And the iij. day aftir, he deide for sorou, as some men saide, because he myghte not come to his ansuer and excuse him of suche thyngis as were falsli put on him; for the said duke of Suffolk and lord Say, and othir of thair assent, so stirid and excited the kyng ayens the said duke of Gloucestre that he myghte nevir come to his excuse; for thay hadde cast among thaym a prive conclusioun, the whiche as yit is not come to the knowlage of the commune peple, and thay wiste welle that thay sholde nevir brynge it aboute tile he were ded; but the certaynte of his deth is not yit openly knowe, but ther is no thing so prive, as the gospel saith, but atte laste it shal be openne.[100]

The account is extremely subtle in its construction, employing a carefully layered arrangement of information and specific vocabulary to influence its audience. From the outset the Duke of Suffolk and Lord Saye are identified as the orchestrators of the plot: they are 'false' in comparison to the 'noble' Gloucester, and 'hadde longe tyme conspired and ymagyned his death'. By identifying their treasonable intent with official terms, the chronicler's statement that they could not 'sle him [Gloucester] be

[100] *English Chronicle*, pp. 62-3.

no trewe mene3' is corroborated.[101] In addition, the chronicler's condemnation is supported by the creation of a strong emotional dimension to the account. Gloucester is reported to have 'deide for sorou' because of the malicious intrigues contrived against him. Likewise, the deception practised upon the common people in having them block the roads of the parliament not only signals an abuse of the parliament's purpose to represent the people, but is all the more shocking because many innocent people died from the cold whilst performing it. Indeed, it is the betrayal of the people rather than the death of the Duke in itself that is predominant in the account. By revealing Suffolk and Saye's 'prive conclusioun', the chronicle is able to herald itself as a champion of the people. Moreover, by providing a conclusive explanation, the chronicle's candour appears to collapse all of the uncertainties surrounding the event. Yet in attempting to provide meaning and channel opinion, the account simply reinvents rather than supplants rumour.

Yet despite their generalisation of common grievances, references to popular opinion often brought the chroniclers into close contact with these views. Grievances arising from governmental policies were a source of particular discontent and are keenly observed in the chronicles. Looking back upon the king's marriage, the *Brut* chronicler maintained that 'some men hold opinion' that it was the source of the king's problems. His reasoning is based upon the failure of the initial plan for the king to marry the Duke of Armagnac's sister, which resulted in the decision to marry Margaret of Anjou instead:

> which was A dere marriage for þe reame of Englond; ffor it is knowne verely þat, for to haue hir, was delyuered þe Duchie of Angeo & þe Erldome of Maign, which was þe key of Normandie, for þe Frensh men tente. And Aboue þis, þe said Marquys of Southfolk axed in playn parlement A fyftenth & an half for to feche hir out of Fraunce. Se now what A marriage was þis, as to þe comparison of þat oþer marriage of Armynyke![102]

Although the chronicler goes on to attribute almost every crisis of Henry's reign to his marriage, the reasoning he employs is not revelatory like the *English Chronicle*, but

[101] The notion that the king was 'stirid and excited' in his judgment of Gloucester instead of being allowed to draw his own conclusions indicates a common contemporary concern about the provision of counsel. See Watts, *Henry VI*, pp. 61-2.
[102] *Brut*, p. 511.

draws upon facts that it claims were 'knowne verely'. Other chronicles also maintain that events arising from the king's marriage were a source of prevailing discontent. *Bale's Chronicle* observes that 'the peple spake stranngley' of the birth of the king's son, correlating with the speculations heard in indictments for seditious speech about why the queen failed to produce an heir during the first eight years of her marriage.[103] The chronicler's observations about the financial pressures placed upon the people also correspond with the criticisms made in the indictments.[104] Following the granting of higher taxation by the parliament at Westminster in 1449, 'many other taskes and loones [were] leveed of the peple be sotell and straunge meanes…So þe was noo good rule nor stableness at that tyme to greet discomfort and hevynes of the peple'.[105] These demands were so great that the *English Chronicle* attributes them as the cause of the Cade Revolt, for what 'for taxeȝ and tallageȝ and other oppressions' the common people 'might no live be thair handwork and husbondrie, wherefore thay grucchid sore ayens thaym that hadde the gouernaunce of the land'.[106] Thus, even though some of the chroniclers' references to such common talk are unique to their accounts, the concerns they represented evidently possessed general relevance.

If the chronicles' presentations of rumours and popular discontent bear witness to actual concerns, then it is possible to regard the vocabularies that they used to describe and categorise them as significant indicators of how dissent was formed. For instance, the 'grucching' inspired by the government's economic policy indicates the discontent and restlessness inspired by these oppressive measures. With its almost onomatopoeic quality, 'grouching' is a term that captures the mounting sense of injustice felt by the common people. As James Scott observes, grumbling is not inarticulate protest but a language of dissent that exists below the surface of everyday politics.[107] Evidence of such latent discontent is particularly apparent in the years

[103] *Bale's Chronicle*, p. 141. On the theories about the queen's childlessness, see NA KB9/260 m. 85 (1446, Suffolk), and *Historical Manuscripts Commission* V, (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1876), p. 455.
[104] Criticisms of the government's financial policies were wide-ranging but united in their perception of the government's pillaging. Accusations included claims that the lords were practising extortion (NA KB9/260 m. 85, 1446, Suffolk); the king was greedy and responsible for robbing the people (NA KB9/260 m. 1, 1448, Lincolnshire); the tax on aliens was exorbitant (NA KB9/262 m. 2, 1449, Cambridgeshire); and the king had lost all of his forbears' wealth (NA KB9/966 m. 55, 1446, London).
[105] *Bale's Chronicle*, pp. 125-6.
[106] *English Chronicle*, pp. 64-5. Financial pressures were also prominent in the Cade petition; see Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 187.
[107] Scott, *Domination*, p. 155.

surrounding Cade's Revolt. How it came to erupt in open defiance can be witnessed through the language used by the chroniclers' to describe the mounting hostility felt towards the Duke of Suffolk in 1449. *Bale's Chronicle* asserts that

> William de la Pole Duke of Suffolk having than aboute the king all þe rule and the governaunce of this land was wondrely in the common voys of þe peple noysed and disclaundred to be þe meene and causer of the seid hurtes and losse taken by the seid ffrensshmen and scottes and þt þe king wold not take the seid resumpcion.[108]

The *Great Chronicle* likewise reports that 'in England many murmurs & Grudgis began this yere to spryng again the marquis of Suffolk ffor the murdur of the duke of Glowcetyr & other thyngys executed by hym w^{t}yn this Realm'.[109] Taking a different note, the *English Chronicle* states that

> the commune vois and fame was that tyme, that the duke of Suffolk William de la Pole, and the said duke of Somerset, with othir of thair assent, hadde maad delyueraunce of Aunge and Mayn...and hadde also aliened and sold the duchie of Normandie to the king of Fraunce; wherefore alle the peple of this lond and speciallie the communeȝ cride ayens the said duke of Suffolk, and said he was a traitour.[110]

The different terms employed by each chronicler to represent popular outcry against Suffolk are significant in recording the stages by which discontent transformed into outright condemnation: 'Murmurs & Grudgis' about the Duke's actions precede his being 'noysed and disclaundred' and ultimately deemed a traitor. Moreover, with the king's failure to punish Suffolk, the rumours that fuelled popular hatred caused rebellions to break out. The *Brut* records that 'A gret rumor' arose among the commonalty as a result of Suffolk's release from the Tower, 'In so myche þat, in some placeȝ, men gadred togedre, & made þame capitaynes – as Blew-Berde & oþer'.[111] In using the term 'rumour', the chronicler not only indicates a more significant and powerful language than the mutterings of discontent that preceded it, but also shows how rumour unified and motivated those who participated in it.

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[108] *Bale's Chronicle*, p. 125.

[109] *Great Chronicle*, p. 181.

[110] *English Chronicle*, p. 68.

[111] *Brut*, p. 516. The account is very similar to that given in the *Great Chronicle* (p. 181) and *Vitellius A XVI* (p. 158), reflecting either a shared source or that one of the chronicles was used as an exemplar. Antonia Gransden gives a detailed account of the overlaps between the London chronicles in relation to their genesis alongside the *Brut* in *Historical Writing*, pp. 228-9, as does McLaren, *The London Chronicles of the Fifteenth Century*.

The ability of the chroniclers to depict the escalation of popular complaint as a logical sequence obscures the vitality of this process to some extent. Yet at the same time as the chroniclers attempt to generalise and manage popular political language, the terminology they use also indicates the trepidation they felt about the capacity of rumour and criticism to provoke extreme reactions. For instance, the remark that the Duke of Suffolk 'was wondrely in the common voys' imparts the sense of awe raised by the prevalence and magnitude of popular clamour.[112] Likewise, the observation that 'murmurs & Grudgis began this yere to spryng again the marquis of Suffolk' indicates the ability for grievances to spontaneously erupt in open resentment.[113] Kapferer notes a similar capacity in modern descriptions of rumour, where our ways of talking about it as something which 'flies' or 'runs rife' attributes it a life of its own.[114] In medieval terminology, rumour is both acknowledged to be a mutable force and treated as an almost physical entity because of its ability to generate group expression and action.

Rumour's materiality is particularly indicated when popular outcry reaches fever pitch within a very short space of time, merging speculative talk about an event with the desire to take physical action against it. A prominent example occurs in the riots that broke out in London in 1455 as a result of disputes between the London mercers and the Lombard population in the city. Both the *Brut* and the *Great Chronicle* give the same account:

> In þis same yere fill A gret Affray in London Ayenst þe Lumbardes. The cause began for A yong man toke A dagger fro A Lumbard, & brake it; wherfor þe yong man on þe morne was sent fore to come tofore þe Mair & Aldermen, & þer, for þe offense, he was committed to warde. And then þe Mair departed fro þe Guyldhall for to go home to his dyner, but in þe Chepe þe yong men of þe mercerie, for þe moste parte Apprentises, held þe Mair & Shyreves stil in Chepe, & wold nat suffer him to departe vnto þe tyme þat þare fellow, which was committed to warde, wer delyuered; & so by force þei rescued þer felowe fro prisone, & þat doen, þe Mair & Shyreves departed, & the prisoner was delyuered, which, if he had be put to prisone, had be in Iubardie of his lyfe. And þan began A Rumor in þe Cite Ayenst þe Lumbardes, And þe same evening þe handcrafty peple of þe town

[112] *Bale's Chronicle*, p. 125.
[113] *Great Chronicle*, p. 181.
[114] Kapferer, *Rumors*, p. 50.

> Arose, & come to the Lumbardes houses, & dispoyled & robbed diuerse of þame; wherefore þe Mair & Aldremen come with þe honest peple of þe town, & drofe þame thens, & sent some of thame þat had stolen, to Newgate. And þe yong man þat was rescued bi his felowes saw þis gret Rumor, Affray & robbery, followed of his first mevyng to þe Lumbard; he departed & went to Westmynster to sanctuary, or els it had cost him his lyfe, ffor Anone After come down An oþer determine for to do Iustice on al þame þat so rebelled in þe Cite Ayens þe Lumbardes.[115]

Rumour's power to incite violent actions is witnessed directly here, both in the retributive robberies committed against the Lombards and the uprisings that occurred as a result. What is especially interesting is that the process is not only recorded by the narrative, but is also acknowledged by the emphasis placed upon rumour as a physical agent. Rumour arises as a result of the rescue of the man who broke the Lombard's dagger and quickly gains in fervency, with the retributive thefts taking place upon the same day. The transformation of rumour into action occurs at the point when the young man 'saw þis gret Rumor'. 'Seeing' a rumour, which is an essentially oral medium, is an unusual formulation. Yet in an environment where latent tensions about immigration and xenophobia existed, rumour could quickly merge spoken and physical dissent in a highly potent political gesture.

With the capacity for such spontaneous evolution, the reason why the authorities were so concerned to contain the spread of rumour among the common people becomes obvious. Although the chroniclers' structured presentations enabled them to look back upon rumours and interpret them to their advantage, they were not so malleable in reality. Following Cade's Revolt, the proclamation published for Cade's arrest attempted to diminish support for the rebel by claiming that he had 'rered upp the Divell in the semblaunce of a blak dogge in his chaumbre where he was loggyd at Derteford', had killed a pregnant woman whilst living in Sussex, and was 'sworne to the Frensh partie'.[116] Such extravagant fabrications failed to prevent the numerous individuals who staged subsequent uprisings from claiming that Cade was

[115] *Brut*, pp. 522-3; *Great Chronicle*, p. 188.

[116] *Historical Manuscripts Commission* V, p. 455. For discussion of the 1450 proclamation and the subsequent attainder against Cade issued in 1453, see David Grummitt, 'Deconstructing Cade's Rebellion: Discourse and Politics in the Mid Fifteenth Century', in *The Fifteenth Century VI*, ed. Linda Clark, (Woodrbidge: Boydell and Brewer, 2006), pp. 111-12.

still alive and should have been king.[117] Likewise, the first article of the petition produced by the Cade rebels claimed that it had been 'opynly noysyd that Kent shuld be dystroyd with a ryall power & made a wylde fforest for the dethe of the duke of Suffolk'.[118] The intention to discourage further rebellious actions backfired by providing a new source of anxiety for popular fears to crystallise around. Official rhetoric was unable to counter popular outcry by simply mimicking its opprobrious status.

As with all of the rumours that circulated during this period, what made them powerful was their audiences' desire to hear them. According to Kapferer, 'a rumor's content must itself satisfy two conditions of belief: one must be *able* to and *want* to believe it'.[119] Beyond the limited horizons of the chronicles, popular discussion was taking place upon a wide range of political subjects, and in doing so, was generating rumours. Because rumours are constructed from limited information, imaginative engagement is an important part of their genesis.[120] In unsettled times, this process is attractive because it suspends standard notions of order, offering the potential to formulate alternative world views. Consequently, when rumours of invasion and reprisal for popular actions generated reactionary rebellions, it was also common for prophetic visions to become part of their outlook. The past followers of Cade who met in the forest of Worth in Kent under the gentleman, William Dalby, in April 1451 claimed that they would be delivered from Henry's rule by a ''marvellous and terrible man of high birth and of the ancient race', carrying on his arms a red lion and a white lion with an army of 200,000 men gathering from various parts of England'.[121] Prophecies of a new age mixed well with the egalitarian views expressed by the more politically radical common people, and became more marked once the Duke of York

[117] Harvey describes a number of Kentish risings that claimed affiliation with Cade following his rebellion; *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, pp. 143, 154, 162, 170. Even in 1457, John Gayle was indicted for, among other things, claiming that Cade was still alive and would lead a rebellion to restore order to the realm; *State Trials*, p. 442. For examples of how Cade's name was used to pursue personal disputes, see Grummitt, 'Deconstructing Cade's Rebellion', p. 117.
[118] Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 186, quoting BL Cotton Roll IV 50. In the 1631 copy of the *Annales*, John Stow attributed the source of the rumour to Lord Saye, the former sheriff of Kent, and who was one of the government ministers executed during the 1450 rebellion; *ibid.*, p. 73. The only other article to mention rumour was the seventh in the petition, which identified the abuses occurring in the management of the lands in France as having been 'notyd be the comyne voyse'. Although many of the articles can be traced to popular discussion, the fact that it is directly acknowledged in these two instances underscores how developed popular opinion was upon them.
[119] Kapferer, *Rumors*, p. 70.
[120] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[121] Harvey, *Jack Cade's Revolt*, p. 155.

emerged as a contender for the throne in the early 1450s.[122] Yet as Harvey has observed, although resistance died out between 1454 and 1456 when York became Protector, it was the desire for governmental stability rather than innate support for the Yorkist cause that was responsible.[123] The development of the political consciousness of the common people meant that popular opinion could be influenced but not controlled completely. It is for this reason that the use of opprobrious language to make political statements became such a prominent and contested force.

3.4 Conclusion

It is the argument of this chapter that seditious speech and rumour constituted significant political languages in the fifteenth century. Opprobrious comments are always political in their denigration of hierarchy and authority. Yet in the years preceding the country's collapse into civil war, the direction of such language at the king and his counsellors meant that it became especially provocative. By establishing and enforcing speech as a treasonable offence, the government was able to isolate negative political comment and stress its opprobrious character. Indictments and chronicle accounts of seditious speech reveal the processes by which individual utterances were rearticulated by official presentation to emphasise culpability. Yet the ability to delimit the opprobrious character of popular criticism was not as straightforward as these records present. In particular, the assumption that documenting offensive language invoked a rigid social and ideological distinction between the speaker and the recorder is not always so clear-cut. The increased number of prosecutions for treasonable language in the mid-fifteenth century gives the impression that distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable language were sharply drawn, yet the languages used to articulate dissent took various forms and possessed shades of meaning that defy rigid classification. As the varying

[122] Examples of revolts that proclaimed these views are noted by Wolffe, *Henry VI*, p. 18, and Virgoe, 'Ancient Indictments', p. 259. On the role of prophecy in fifteenth-century politics, see Lesley Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs in Later Medieval England*, (York: York Medieval Press, 2000); Lesley Coote and Tim Thornton, 'Merlin, Erceldoune, Nixon: A Tradition of Popular Political Prophecy', *New Medieval Literatures* 4 (2001), 117-37. On the use of prophecy by both Lancastrian and Yorkist governments, see Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, pp. 1-31, and Alison Allan, 'Yorkist Propaganda: Pedigree, Prophecy and the 'British History' in the Reign of Edward IV', in *Patronage, Pedigree and Power*, ed. C. Ross, (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1979), pp. 171-92.

[123] Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, pp. 170, 184.

interpretations taken toward political expression show, decisions about the status of language were not so much confirmed as constantly arbitrated.

Although such mediation is continuous, the context of the fifteenth century provides a peculiarly acute example of these processes. Immediate political circumstances determined the nature of rumour and seditious speech, but their politicisation as languages was the result of long-term social and economic trends. Who was speaking opprobrious language and to what effect are uppermost in indictments, indicating the changing political status of the common people. Concerns about the implications of this development were not restricted to the events of 1381 as Harvey has suggested,[124] but were also raised in the legislation produced to limit the spread of dissident religious ideas in the vernacular. If, as Spencer argues, 'the unstated intention – and result – of the *Constitutions* was to underscore social distinctions', then the focus upon artisans, husbandmen and yeomen as the speakers of seditious language can be regarded as arising from the same motives.[125] Concerns about the 'imagination' of these seditious speakers are uppermost in treason legislation, highlighting the burgeoning political consciousness of the common people. The terms used to categorise critical opinions also acknowledge anxieties about divergent ideas, recording the process by which rumour generated group beliefs and mustered radical political ideologies. However, by reinforcing the treasonable status of rumour and seditious speech the authorities affirmed their deviant capacity and the power that could be wielded by those who spoke them. Furthermore, the widespread dissemination, interpretation, and fabrication of rumour and seditious speech indicate that attitudes towards them were varied, being discussed and deployed in different ways by groups across society. The political status afforded to opprobrious language was a construct that belied the social fragmentation occasioned by linguistic change. Chapter 4 addresses this situation as it manifested in the conflicting local and national concerns of the Paston letters.

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[124] Harvey, 'Popular Politics', p. 167.
[125] Helen Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 178.

Chapter 4

The Politics of Writing and Report in the Paston Letters

Chapter four explores the languages used to represent and articulate political issues in the correspondence of the Pastons and their associates. The letters written by this Norfolk family have long been recognised as affording an exceptionally detailed insight into the mentalities of the provincial gentry in the fifteenth century. Yet in addition to the family's preoccupation with personal status and domestic concerns, a considerable proportion of their letters reports issues and concerns arising from local and national politics. These considerations alter the perspective of their correspondence, revealing a constant mediation between internal and external interests. By locating the letters within a broad network of news exchange, they can be read both as a case study of how political ideas were discussed and circulated, and how they were received by a particular social group.

Previous studies of the Paston letters have either recounted the history of the family from their letters or have focused upon their domestic and provincial mores.[1] Because of the range of correspondents within the Paston family, it is possible to approach the letters thematically, by gender, and to isolate particular writers. Besides direct studies of the family and their letters, it has been common critical practice to extract incidental details from the letters, particularly where comments are made about local or national politics. One of the problems arising from this method is that it overlooks the dialogues which the letters participated in and prevents a comparative understanding of the different approaches and vocabularies employed by each writer. Studies by Diane Watt and Alison Hanham have provided an important corrective by emphasising how an understanding of contemporary letter-writing conventions permits stylistic variations and deviations to be observed.[2] Although the Paston letters

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[1] Narrative accounts of the Paston family include: Helen Castor, *Blood and Roses: The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2004); Richard Barber, *The Pastons: A Family in the Wars of the Roses*, (London: Folio Society, 1981); and Colin Richmond's three-volume study of the family: *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: The First Phase*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Fastolf's Will*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Endings*, (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000).

[2] Diane Watt, '"No Writing for Writing's Sake": The Language of Service and Household Rhetoric in the Letters of the Paston Women', in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, ed.

share a common format in their salutations, relation of news, and deferential closing remarks, the language used to express these sentiments often exceeds such standard formulations. Even though the letters were exchanged between intimates, the registers used in them reflect different relationships and respond to changing personal and public circumstances. As such, the registers employed were both tailored to suit the purposes of each writer and represent the environments within which the letters were written and received.

Reconstructing the ideological arena within which the Pastons' letters were composed requires that the family's local position and national concerns are recognised as being interrelated. Both Colin Richmond and Judith Ferster have identified the cohesive political community of the 'governing class':

> Not only are 'central' and 'local' meaningless terms within so small a country, which by the fifteenth century had been much and closely governed for five hundred years, the personnel at Westminster and in the localities overlapped, and intermingled, interconnected. That is why and how information was conveyed to and fro so freely, so casually. Everyone, or almost everyone who was anyone, was in the know.[3]

Yet the division between society's 'governors' and the 'governed' does not mean that the need for news was limited to the elite.[4] I. M. W. Harvey has emphasised that the Pastons' interest in local and national political issues was generally shared by the 'moderately landed, literate, and litigious' members of the county community below the level of the major officeholders across the south-east.[5] Moreover, as the

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Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 122-138; Alison Hanham, *The Celys and their World: An English Merchant Family of the Fifteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 14. For a sociolinguistic analysis of the conventions of modern letter writing and argument for the criteria for a typology of the letter, see Patrizia Violi, 'Letters', in *Discourse and Literature*, ed. Teun A. van Dijk, (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 1985), pp. 149-68.

[3] Colin Richmond, 'Hand and Mouth: Information Gathering and Use in England in the Later Middle Ages', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1 (1988), 242-3; Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, p. 24.

[4] Richmond describes the 'governed' as 'all those from gentleman to duke', while urban merchants and businessman and aspiring yeomen/gentlemen fall just below this group and cross into the 'governed proper: the more than ninety per cent of Englishmen and women'; 'Hand and mouth', p. 233. I. M. W. Harvey alternatively argues that popular politics was the reserve of the 98% of the population not represented by the clergy or nobility; Harvey, 'Was there Popular Politics in Fifteenth-Century England?', in *The McFarlane Legacy: Studies in Late Medieval Politics and Society*, ed. R. H. Britnell, and A. J. Pollard, (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1995), p. 155.

[5] I. M. W. Harvey, *Jack Cade's Revolt*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) p. 106, quoting C. L. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), pp. 10-11.

government increasingly made public announcements in English to court popular opinion, the spread of news by word of mouth continued to operate across society, fostering both a widespread diffusion of ideas and the emergence of unofficial accounts. Artificial distinctions about the source and circulation of news restrict awareness of the extent of political discussion that was taking place in the realm, and also promote fallacies about the nature of the Paston letters. Although the men of the family were educated, the use of amanuenses by the Paston women raises questions about the extent of their literacy.[6] Likewise, the family's extensive written correspondence did not override the primacy of the spoken word. Letters were primarily used for functional correspondence, when a written record was required, or to facilitate conversation when oral report was infeasible. Indications are often made in the letters that full details of an event were to be given when the correspondents next met, or that the messenger was to convey confidential details in person. These are all indications that the growth of written communication in the fifteenth century complemented rather than substituted oral report.[7]

Rather than regarding them as isolated written artefacts, it is pertinent to consider the Paston letters as representing a particular point within a much broader network of communication. Underlying each letter are conversations, gossip and rumours that caused additional dialogues and vocabularies to be incorporated into the text. The presence of these languages is overt in cases where speech is reported or copies of documents are included in letters, but are less conspicuous when re-rehearsed according to the design of each correspondent. Like translation, such rephrasing and interpretation is never complete, however. Indeed, the ability for the Pastons to obtain news from an array of sources indicates how their correspondence was not only conducted among a closed group, but overlapped with and mirrored numerous other networks where information and ideas were being exchanged.[8] Not all

[6] G. A. Lester, 'The Books of a Fifteenth-Century English Gentleman, Sir John Paston', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 88 (1987), 200-217; Watt, 'No Writing for Writing's Sake', p. 124.
[7] In his study of contemporary Polynesian letter-writing practices, Niko Besnier observes the same coexistent relationship between speech and writing: oral report 'acts as a frame for letters...providing a context in which they can be properly interpreted and evaluated'. *Literacy, Emotion, and Authority: Reading and Writing on a Polynesian Atoll*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 78, 91.
[8] Networks existed at a variety of levels among social groups. On the networks created by 'common-profit' books, see Wendy Scase, 'Reginald Pecock, John Carpenter, and John Colop's 'Common-Profit' Books: Aspects of Book Ownership and Circulation in Fifteenth-Century London', *Medium*

of these intersections were desirable or intended; in the search for reliable information, political opinions could be repeated that rendered their writers susceptible to the dangers that attended their expression. Following the use of letters to muster participants in popular rebellion, fears about the spread of Lollardy through the posting of bills, and the spread of seditious rumours, letter-writing became a suspect activity.[9] Yet the political status of false news also made it a potent political weapon. Whilst opposing government factions published both official and unofficial news to capitalise upon popular news networks, so the Pastons and their enemies intercepted letters in order to gather incriminating evidence.[10] A desire for news went hand in hand with its exploitation.

It is thus important to appreciate that the Paston letters represent both the affairs of a particular family and reflect the social and political environments within which they took shape. These contexts are reproduced in every letter, influencing both what was said and the way that it was said. Reports of deviance and disorder were particularly influenced by the circumstances surrounding them. The Paston family were especially sensitive to slurs upon their reputation. Their rise to the ranks of the gentry was recent enough to still be remembered by local rivals, and their disputed inheritance of both William Paston's and Sir John Fastolf's lands in the mid-fifteenth century only emphasised their precarious position. In addition, national politics increasingly intruded into regional affairs, exacerbating local tensions. A lack of monarchical leadership and the presence of any magnate families in Norfolk meant that adherents of the Duke of Suffolk were permitted to dominate and disrupt local politics. In Norfolk and Suffolk, Thomas Tuddenham and John Heydon wrought

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Ævum 60 (1991), 261-74. On the family and kinship networks behind inheritance patterns, see Elisabeth E. Salter, *Cultural Creativity in the Early English Renaissance: Popular Culture in Town and Country*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 55-7.

[9] Besides their role in the 1381 rising, letters were often used to muster participants in popular rebellions. The *Chronicle of the Rebellion in Lincolnshire* pays considerable attention to the use of letters in its account of the rebels who gathered under the Earl of Warwick and Duke of Clarence to oppose Edward IV in 1470. See the *Chronicle of the Rebellion in Lincolnshire, 1470*, ed. J. G. Nichols, (Camden Society, 1847). For discussion of the course of the rebellion, see Michael A. Hicks, *False, Fleeting, Perjur'd Clarence: George, Duke of Clarence, 1449-78*, (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1980), pp. 65-74, and P. Holland, 'The Lincolnshire Rebellion of March 1470', *English Historical Review* 103 (1988), 849-69.

[10] On the publication and suppression of governmental news, see C. A. J. Armstrong, 'Some Examples of the Distribution and Speed of News in England at the Time of the Wars of the Roses', in his *England, France, and Burgundy in the Fifteenth-Century*, (London: Hambledon Press, 1983), pp. 110-11. For an example of the interception of the Pastons' letters, see Richmond, 'Hand and Mouth', pp. 239-40. See also Fox, 'Rumour', pp. 609-10.

havoc in the security that their positions as JPs meant that they could dictate what was lawful and what was not. Although the Pastons made constant petitions for redress, the traditional legal vocabularies that they used to represent such riotous behaviour were undermined by the inadequacies of the ruling regime. The language used in the Pastons' letters therefore not only reflects how the family evaluated these events but also how they adapted in their response to them. Contemporary domestic, governmental and linguistic politics coalesced to shape the Pastons' writing and in turn make it a political pursuit.

It is the argument of this chapter that the Paston letters capture a particular linguistic transition. By recording the intersection of speech and writing, the letters negotiate a complex linguistic divide and the issues that it raises for meaning and interpretation. They represent a particular group's attempts to define and assert their political voice against the multivocal backdrop of contemporary political discussion. The first section examines examples of the Pastons' code-switching in their use and representation of opprobrious language in their everyday affairs. The second and third sections explore how the changing local political environment within which the Pastons wrote complicated their use of particular vocabularies and demanded that they develop new linguistic strategies. They look firstly at how legal terminology is applied and tested by experience of disorder, and then address how the common people and popular politics were courted in the pursuit of resolution. Finally, the fourth section addresses the Pastons' engagement with national politics, examining the sources of their news and how the wider political environment impacted upon their reception and representation of such information.

4.1 Representing fame and dispute

As the constant level of defamation cases throughout the fifteenth century indicates, slander was a major source of concern in local communities.[11] Insults could

[11] On the prosecution of defamation in the ecclesiastical courts, see Richard M. Wunderli, *London Church Courts and Society on the Eve of the Reformation*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Medieval Academy of America, 1981); Larry R. Poos, 'Sex, Lies, and the Church Courts of Pre-Reformation England', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 25 (1995), 585-607; Karen Jones and Michael Zell, 'Bad Conversation? Gender and Social Control in a Kentish Borough, c. 1450-c.1570', *Continuity and Change* 13 (1998), 11-31; Bruce Woodcock, *Medieval Ecclesiastical Courts in the Diocese of Canterbury*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1952). On the prosecution of slander in the borough

severely damage the social standing of an individual or family. The Pastons were no exception, relating several affronts to personal and familial honour in their letters. However, although the status of opprobrious comments was constant, the way that such language was used and recorded varied. Besides observing other peoples' abusive comments, the Pastons and their associates also used insults themselves to vent their anger, discredit rivals, influence public opinion, and antagonise each other. A spectrum of attitudes existed towards opprobrious language, ranging from fears about its disruptive capacities to an enjoyment of its deviant potential. These different perceptions particularly manifest in the way that opprobrious language is recorded. Despite claiming to record direct speech, as Deborah Tannen observes, reported speech always deviates from the original version as the words are reproduced in a different context.[12] Reports of opprobrious language thus need to be weighed against the overall linguistic construction of each letter. As Watt has observed, the Paston letters contain a mixture of languages, including legal terminology, the vocabulary of courtly service, popular phrases, and the homely rhetoric of domestic affairs.[13] The presence of opprobrious language alongside these discourses can complicate and even override their meaning simply because of its precarious status. In their attempts to use and record such language, the Pastons display a prevailing interest in language and the responses it could inspire. It is their particular engagement with and exploitation of the registers of fame and dispute that is addressed in this section.

One of the most vivid episodes from the Paston letters is the violent confrontation that took place between the family's priest, James Gloys, and one of the family's rivals, John Wyndham, in 1448. The version of the event contained in a letter from Margaret Paston to her husband, John Paston I, is carefully structured and has clear implications for the way that the event was intended to be received. Margaret relates how the dispute broke out in the street whilst she was attending mass at the parish church:

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courts, see Marjory K. McIntosh, 'Finding Language for Misconduct: Jurors in Fifteenth-Century Local Courts', in *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 87-122, and McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehaviour in England, 1370-1600*, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1998).

[12] Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 101.

[13] Watt, 'No Writing', p. 127.

> Jamys Gloys come with his hatte on his hede between bothe his men, as he was wont of custome to do. And whanne Gloys was a-yenst Wymondham he said þus, 'Couere thy heed!' And Gloys seid ageyn, 'So I shall for the.' And whanne Gloys was forther passed by þe space of iij or iiij strede, Wymondham drew owt his dagger and seid, 'Shalt þow so, knave?' And þerwith Gloys turned hym and drewe owt his dagger and defendet hym, flying in-to my moderis place and kest a ston as meche as a forthyng lof into þe halle after Gloys; and þan ran owt of þe place ageyn. And Gloys folwyd owt and stod with-owt þe gate, and þanne Wymondham called Gloys thef and seid he shuld dye, and Gloys seid he lyed and called hym charl, and bad hym come hym-self or ell þe best man he hadde, and Gloys wold answere hym or for on. And þanne Haweys ran into Wymondhams place and feched a spere and a swerd, and toke his maister his swerd. And with þe noise of þis a-saut and affray my modir and I come owt of þe chirche from þe sakeryng; and I bad Gloys go in to my moderis place ageyn, and so he dede. And thane Wymondham called my moder and me strong hores, and seid þe Pastons and alle her kyn were [charles of Ge]myngham [and w]e seid he lyed, knave and charl as he was. And he had meche large langage, as ye shall knowe her-after by mowthe.
> (I: 224)[14]

The account is exceptionally dramatic in its retelling, a feature that Watt attributes to Margaret's attempt to reproduce oral narrative. This especially manifests in the shift from third to first-person narrative when Margaret enters the scene, making for a particularly striking rendition: 'The spontaneity of the tense-switching is analogous to the grammatical fluidity of spoken narrative'.[15] The disrespectful comments, insults, and details of the assault also reinforce the authenticity of the account, especially in the first half of the narrative when Margaret Paston was absent from the scene. However, it is impossible to know how much of the dialogue was overheard by Margaret before she was roused by the 'noise of þis a-saut'. Furthermore, because the letter was written for Margaret by James Gresham, one of the family's legal agents, it is difficult to determine whose voice we are hearing: the account may have been dictated by Margaret after hearing Gloys' account, composed in conjunction with Gloys, and in turn flavoured with Gresham's inputs as he penned the letter. The result is a multivocal construction that not only recreates the voices of the event itself, but reconstructs the dialogues within which it was set.

[14] All quotations from the Paston letters are from Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, EETS s.s. 20 and 21, 2 vols., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), and are referred to by the volume and page number of this edition.
[15] Watt, 'No Writing', p. 132.

Hearing these voices in and beyond the narrative requires that both its intended effect and its reception by its recipient are considered. One of the most prominent features of the account is its sensationalism. Particular attention is paid to the violence witnessed, with a whole arsenal of daggers, spears, swords, and stones as big as farthing loaves being involved. The language used is equally colourful, quickly progressing from acerbic remarks to outright abuse, where the protagonists are cast as knaves, thieves, churls, and whores. At the heart of these observations lies an awareness of the affront that they represented. Although primarily an altercation between Wyndham and Gloys, family connections clearly underpinned their dispute and were brought to the surface when Margaret and her mother entered the scene. Wyndham's insults not only aroused indignation because they were personal but also because they identified a lingering contention about the Pastons' social status. As Caroline Barron has shown, the hole in the letter that obscures 'charles of Gemyngham' is a deliberate one.[16] The phrase appears to refer to the family's reputed origins as bonded tenants of the local manor of Gimingham in Paston, a past association that John I was eager to forget in his efforts to consolidate his gentility. However, local men like Wyndham, who were equally eager to trade their humble background for gentle status, were less absent-minded. As Colin Richmond remarks of the scene,

> It is surely significant that, in searching among the vocabulary of abuse, Wyndham should bring out such a specific taunt, 'charles of Gemyngham', all the more significant in that, with dagger and sword in hand and so enraged, what burst out from him is likely to have been uppermost in his mind. It was so insulting because it was true, true because it was so insulting.[17]

It may not have been John Paston I that cut the phrase from the letter, but clearly it brought home to him how vulnerable his family's honour was to such taunts. His fears about what other 'large langage' would reach him 'by mowthe' in the ensuing days concerned more than just bad language.

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[16] Caroline Barron, 'Who were the Pastons?', *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 4 (1972), p. 533.
[17] Richmond, *Paston Family: The First Phase*, p. 14.

John Paston I's concerns about his family origins and who was discussing them continued throughout his life. In 1461 he complained to Margaret that his old adversary, that 'knavyssh knyght' and 'fals shrewe', Sir Miles Stapleton, had, along with his wife

> blaveryd here of my kynred in hodermoder, but be that tyme we have rekned of old dayes and late dayes myn shall be found more worchepfull thane hys and hys wyfes, or ellys I woll not for hys gilt gypcer. (I: 95-6)

As Richmond relates, the following months saw Paston re-rehearsing the subject: firstly, to ask Margaret to discover whether Stapleton had a copy of the Gimingham court rolls, and secondly, to receive news from his son that Edward IV did.[18] The matter was not resolved until after John I's death in 1466, when the family's gentility was certified by the king. Official recognition of status was reliant upon documentary evidence, but as John I's fears in the early 1460s indicate, social standing in the local community was strongly influenced by oral testimony.[19] John I's indignation at Stapleton's incontinent tongue acknowledges how damaging idle gossip could be. There was not enough room in the contracted political world of Norfolk to contain all the ambitious and upwardly mobile families without friction. As a result, the fraught language exchanged between antagonists indicates that linguistic dexterity was a crucial accomplishment in the pursuit and maintenance of status. Although the Pastons and their associates often depict themselves as the subjects of abuse, their presentation of events often reveals a more subtle intelligence at work, with language being deployed in intricate ways.

Hostility over the Pastons' social-climbing became particularly acute with their inheritance of John Fastolf's lands. John Paston I's attempts to validate the will began almost immediately after Fastolf's death in November 1459 and developed into a protracted dispute that destroyed old alliances, most notably in the rift it created

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[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 16-7.

[19] Richmond argues that an absence of letters from Paston and between other members of the family in the six month period preceding John Paston's death is evidence that the 'charles of Gemyngham' slanders had been resurrected on a large scale, occasioning all of his correspondence to be burnt. This hypothesis, based upon the presumption that it was John Paston who doctored the Wymondham account, is plausible, but begs the question why other dangerous letters, some bearing far more incriminating material and bearing the injunction to be burnt, were not treated as suspiciously. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-9.

between the Pastons and William Yelverton, an ex-employee of Fastolf and a rival executor. The acrimony generated by the will produced an ugly confrontation before Easter in 1460 which was related by Friar John Brackley to William Paston II. Brackley recalls how, during a public dinner, Yelverton accused Brackley of having said that he was responsible for 'the brekyng at Seynt Benettys'. It appears that the 'brekyng' had contributed to the division between Paston and Yelverton, and had involved an argument that Brackley had interrupted:

> 'For sothe', seyd I, 'whan I came in-to the chamber there the fyrst word I hard was this, that ȝe seyd to my Maystyr J. P., "Who that evyr seyth so, I sey he lyeth falsly in hise hede", &c.' 'Ya', quod the justice, 'ȝe schuld haf told what mevyd me to sey so to hym'; and I seyd I cowed not tellyn that I had not herd, &c. Et judex, 'ȝe schuld haf examined the matyr', &c. And I seyd, 'Sire, it longyd not to me to examine the matyr, for I new wele I schuld not be jvge in the matyr, and alonly to a juge it longyth to seue and stodyen illam Sacre Scripture clausulam whiche holy Job seyd, 'Causam quam nesciebam diligentissime investigabam.' And than, 'No', seyth he hardyly, 'ȝe schal not be jvge, but yf ȝe had owt me as good wil as ȝe dede and do to Paston, ȝe wold than haue sergyd the cause of my gret greef, why I seyd as I seyd, &c.; but I haf sey the day ȝe lovyd me betyr than hym, for he yaf ȝow nevyr cause of love as I haf done', &c.
> 'Sire', I sey, 'he hath yovyn me cause swyche as I am be-hold to hym fore,' &c. 'Ya', seyth he, 'ȝe shcal bere wytnesse, &c., and the oþyr Maystyr Clement and W. Schipdam.' Cui ego, 'As for the wytness I schal bere I schal sey and writyn as I knowe', &c. Cui ille, 'I made hise testament for on testament that he made, and I knowe boþe the writere and makere, aftyr hise wyl and intent ȝe stoned stille there-in as ȝe dede than', &c. Et tunc gauisus est, &c. Et ille, 'I knowe ȝe haf a gret hert, &c., but I ensure ȝow the lordys a-bove at London arn infoormyd of ȝow, and they schal delyn wyth ȝow wele anow.' Cui ego, 'He or they that hath infoormyd the lordys wele of me, I am behold to hem. And yf they be oþyrwise infoormyd I schal do as wele as I may; but be myn trowthe I schal not be aferd to sey as I knowe for none lord of this lond, yf I may go saf and come, quod non credo, per deum, propter euidencias multas', &c. Tunc Prior, 'Domine. Non expedit nec racioni seu vere consciencie congruit quod vos contendatis cum Magistro Paston, vel ipse vobiscum, pro bonis defuncti, que solum sua et non vestra sunt; mirror valde', inquit, 'cum prioribus temporibus tam magni fuistis amici, et non sic modo, quare valde doleo.' Cui judex, 'There is no man besy to bring vs to-gydere', &c.; so that I kan wele thynk it were lytil maystri. But in faith I knowe wele the iuge, W. Wayte hise mawment, hise boy Yimmys, wyth hevedy and furmows langage haue and dayly do vttyr lewd and schrewd dalyauns, &c. (2: 333-4)

It is a complex dialogue made even more intricate by Brackley's presentation. By framing the dialogue with legal phrases and representing the Prior's speech in Latin, the account becomes more than just a basic report. Brackley's frequent addition of '&c.' particularly indicates that his narrative was truncated to produce a concise record for future reference, whilst also introducing a margin for error in his recollection of the events. As Yelverton's commands for Brackley to 'bere wytnesse' indicate, the events related were not part of a mundane dispute but a turning point in a relationship.

Such careful crafting does not completely disguise Brackley's personal involvement, however. As Richmond observes, Yelverton appears remorseful about the rift between Paston and himself, lamenting that 'There is no man besy to bring vs to-gydere', and complaining that Brackley had deserted him.[20] Yet despite the esteem that Yelverton previously held him in, the Friar's presentation of Yelverton is far from favourable and clearly reveals his allegiances. Moreover, Brackley is totally unabashed about adopting this stance. His attitude is made apparent from the outset of his letter: 'Jesu mercy, Marie help, cum sanctis omnibus, trewe menyng executourys fro fals terrauntys and alle tribulacionys, amen' (2: 332). Richmond has censured Brackley for being 'foul-mouthed', but besides his blustering language, it is evident that the Friar had a keen understanding of the rhetorical effect of his writing. His confident reconstruction of his dispute with Yelverton not only sees him sermonising the event by incorporating references from Job, but also composing a broader narrative scheme to expose Yelverton's insincerity. In the opening to his letter, Brackley recounts Yelverton's reaction to his Sunday sermon:

> Ryte reuerent sire, &c., W. Y. judex and hise wyf were here wyth here meny and here hors in Our Ladyes place, &c., on Satyrday at evyn and yedyn hens on Monday aftyr none…And I prechid on the Sonday byfore hem, not warnyd tyl after mete; and than, for lak of Maystyr Vergeant or owr wardeyn Barnard, I sodeynly seyd the sermon. And byfore I had ryte evyl and soleyn chere of hem bothe, &c., but aftyr the sermon he seyd opely to the Priowr, heryng myche folk in the chirch, 'I haf herd hym oftyn here and ellys-where, but is the best that evyr I herd hym sey,' &c., and at evyn drank to me and made me good chere, half on the spleen, &c. (2: 332)

[20] Richmond, *Paston Family: Fastolf's Will*, p. 100.

For Brackley, Yelverton's praise is insincere – sarcastic even – but by channelling his hostility into a flippant aside he is careful to suggest rather than impose this opinion. His attention to language throughout the letter strikes a difficult balance between asserting the significance of these dialogues and mediating his position in relation to them. Yet for Brackley, who could give impromptu sermons, who wielded legal formulae in his everyday correspondence, and who toyed with contentious linguistic issues at the same time as he asserted their seriousness, the letter is a testament to the extent of his verbal skill.

Brackley's redeployment and manipulation of opprobrious language reveals how it could be used to serve one's own interests. Not all of the Paston correspondents were so dexterous, however. Writing in November 1472 to his brother, John Paston II voiced his fears to his brother, John III, that his attempts to flatter the Duchess of Norfolk had been misconstrued:

> I praye yow feele my lady off Norfolkys dysposicion to me wardys, and whethyre she toke any dysplesure at my langage, ore mokkyd ore dysdeyned my wordys…Fore my lady Brandon and Syr William also axhyd me what wordys I had had to hyre at that tyme. They seyde þat my lady was worthye to haue a lordys soon in hyre belye, fore she cowde cheryshe itt and dele warlye wyth it. In trowthe, owther the same ore wordys moche lyke I had to hyre, whyche wordys I ment as I seyde. They leye to þat I seyde she toke hyre ease. Also I scholde haue seyde þat my ladye was off stature goode and had sides longe and large, so that I was in good hope she sholde bere a fayre chylde; he was nott lacyd nore bracyd jne to hys peyn, but þat she left hym rome to pleye hym in. They seye that I seyde my lady was large and grete, and that itt sholde haue rome jnow to goo owt att. And thus whyther my lady mokk me or theye I woote nott. I mente well, by my trowthe, to hyre and to þat she is wyth, as any he þat owythe here best wyll in Ingelond. If ye can by any meene weete whethyre my ladye take it to dysplesure or nowt, or whether she thynke I mokked hyre, or iff she wyght it but lewdnesse off my-selffe, I praye yow sende me worde, for I woot nott whethyre I maye trust thys Lady Brandon ore nott.
>
> (1: 449-50)

As the incident illustrates, misunderstandings could quickly arise from imprudent comments. Yet the real issue here is not that John II had committed a faux pas in his compliments, but that they were misrepresented to the Duchess as insults. When John II questioned Lady Brandon's trustworthiness he was motivated by the fear that she had deliberately attempted to discredit him. Four days later when he wrote to his

brother again, he appeared more sure of his situation, requesting that John III repeat his solicitudes to the Duchess: 'I hope she shall to hyre greet joye and all owres, and I prey God it maye be lyke hyre in worship, wytt, gentylnesse, and euery thynge excepte the verry verry thynge' (1: 452). His altered tone not only expresses relief that he might still win favour, but also relates to his success in accomplishing another matter of persuasion. In his initial correspondence, he referred to an ongoing subject between the brothers: the purchase of a diamond ring to give to Jane Rodon in reparation for her activities as a mole at Caister, one of the disputed Fastolf estates. For John II, it was a treacherous affair:

> I sente yow a letter and a rynge wyth a dyamand, in whyche letter ye might well conceyue what I wold ye scholde do wyth þe same ryng, wyth manye other tydyngys and thyngys whyche I prayed yowe to haue doon for me; whyche letter Boton had the beryng off. It is soo nowe þat I vndrestond that he is owther deed ore ellys harde eskapyd, wheroff I am right heuye, and am not serteyn whethyre the seyd letter and rynge come to yowre handys ore nott. I wolde nott that letter were seyn wyth som folkys, wherffor I praye yow take goode heede hoghe thatt letter comythe to yowre handys, hooll or brokyn; and in especiall I praye yow gete it iff ye haue it nott. (1: 449)

If the letter had strayed into the wrong hands and revealed his bribery, then no amount of flattery could have rescued him from the public shame that would have arisen. His relief upon discovering that the ring had reached his brother safely was tempered by an awareness of the hazards that had attended it:

> As fore the delyueraunce off the rynge to Mestresse Jane Rothon, I dowt nott but it shall be doon in the best wyse so þat ye shall geet me a thank moore than the rynge and I are worthe ore deserue. (1: 452)

Risking public embarrassment to gain personal favour was a dangerous but common practice among families of the Pastons' status. Yet whereas Friar Brackley was able to represent such risky strategies in a way that empowered his position, John II's anxieties indicate what could happen when these tactics failed.

Maintaining the boundary between private correspondence and public affairs became especially difficult when family disputes arose. On these occasions the caution that normally moderated language was forgotten as tempers flared. The disruption caused by such outbursts is indicated by the quarrels that took place

between Margaret Paston and her sons about the favouritism she exhibited towards James Gloys after their father's death. John Paston III write to John II in July 1472 to complain about 'the prowd, pevyshe, and euyll dysposed prest to vs all, Syr Jamys', explaining how

> Many qwarrellys ar pyekyd to get my brodyr E. and me ought of hyr howse. We go not to bed vnchedyn lightly. All þat we do is ille doon, and all that Syr Jamys and Pekok dothe is well doon. Syr Jamys and I be tweyn. We fyll owght be-for my modyr with 'Thow prowd prest' and 'Thow prowd sqwyer', my modyr taking hys part, so I haue almost beshet þe bote as for my modyrs house. (1: 576-7)

John's rancour is preserved in his colloquial language. By recording the abusive statements exchanged between Gloys and himself he reinforces his terse conclusion that he had 'beshet þe bote'. In October he wrote again to his brother to report that the quarrelling had escalated into a vicious war of words:

> Syr Jamys is euyr choppyng at me when my modyr is present, wyth syche wordys as he thynkys wrathe me and also cause my modyr to be dyspleaseid wyth me, evyn as who seyth he wold I wyst that he settyth not by the best of vs. And whan he hathe most vnsettyng woordys to me, I smylle a lytyll and tell hym it is good heryng of thes old talys. (1: 582)

Such spiteful 'choppyng' stands in stark contrast to the conventionally polite, obeisant formulae which frame the letters. By dropping these niceties and privileging insult, the letters stop being functional correspondence and let the offensiveness of the words speak for themselves. As an isolated disagreement between family members, this oversight was not damaging; however, if such polarisation was prolonged it could have severe implications.

Failing to reconcile internal divisions and prevent them from becoming common knowledge could leave a family vulnerable. When a disagreement reached this stage, the language reported became more generalised, acknowledging how personal matters were transformed into popular gossip. On 24 September 1461, James Gloys wrote to John Paston I to implore him to placate his mother, Agnes Paston, before a more serious situation arose:

> at þe reuerence of God lete sum interpretour go a-twix you and my mastres your moder or ye got to London, and all þat ye do shall spede the better; for she is bet on gret malice, and euery man þat she spekith with knowuth here hert and it is like to be a fowle noyse in all þe countre withought it be sone sesid. (2: 250)

Gloys' fears were realised four years later when Margaret Paston wrote to her husband to inform him of his mother's displeasure at his intervention in her affairs:

> my modere told me that she thynkyth right strange that she may not haue the profectys of Clyre ys place in peasabyll wyse for you. She seyt it ys hers and she hath payd most therefore yet, and she sayth she wyll haue the profectys therof or ells she wyll make more folk to speke therof...In gode feyth I hyre moch langage of the demenyng be-twene you and herre. (1: 298-9)

Agnes clearly intended that her outspokenness would force her son to comply with her wishes. Indeed, the effectiveness of her threat to 'make more folk to speke therof' was already proven by Margaret's report that she had heard 'moch langage' on the subject. Yet the effects of slanderous comments were not always easy to determine and could quickly become unmanageable. On 28 October 1470, Margaret Paston angrily rebuked her son, John II, for his financial difficulties and the effect it was having upon their local standing:

> it is noysed þat I haue departed so largely wyth you þat I nowthere help you my-self ner non of my frendes, which is no wurchep and causeth men to set the lesse be vs. And at þis tyme it compellith me to breke vp howshold and to sogeorn, which I am right loth to do if I might othere-wyse haue chosyn, for it caused gret clamour in þis town þat I shall do so and it shuld not haue neded if I had restreyned whan I might. (1: 350)

Rumours of family rifts were hard to quell once they entered the public domain and could seriously undermine personal standing. Margaret's admonition to her son to 'be ware and take hed to soche thynggys as is wretyn wyth-ynne thys letter' (2: 351) provides an indication of just how destructive the 'gret clamour in þis town' might become. As Philippa Maddern has indicated, the pursuit for honour among the

provincial gentry demanded that they not only behaved honourably but were also spoken of honourably.[21]

Although families like the Pastons were primarily concerned to maintain the respect of their peers, popular opinion could play just as significant a role in regulating the worship and honour that they commanded. Margaret's observation that common 'noyse' of her falling-out with her son affected their 'wurchep' indicates how local gossip was an important measure of local standing.[22] Many of the letters use the threat of popular discontent and its implications for personal honour to enforce the gravity of the situation that they relate. In two letters written in 1469, Margaret urged John II that if he did not provide assistance in defending Caister against the assaults of the Duke of Norfolk, his reputation would suffer:

> Of all þes premysses send word how ye wull be demened be as good advyse as ye can gete, and make no lengere delay; for thei must nedes haue hasty socour that be in the place, for thei be sore hurt and haue non help. And if thei haue hasty help it shall be the grettest wurcheþ þat euer ye had, and if þei be not holpen it shall be to you a gret diswurchep, and loke neuer to haue favour of your neybores and frendes but if this spede wele. (1: 340-1)

Margaret was liberal in her emotional blackmail, both describing the predicament at Caister in desperate terms and casting John II's influence in binary terms. In her second letter, Margaret continued to pressurise her son with these menaces:

> your brothere and his felesshep stond in grete joparté at Cayster...so that, but thei haue hasty help, thei be like to lese bothe there lyfes and the place, to the grettest rebuke to you that euer came to any jentilman, for euery man in this countre marvaylleth gretly that ye suffer them to be so longe in so gret joparté with-ought help or othere remedy. (1: 344)

The shame incurred by failing to support one's kin and fellowship was not a fantasy of Margaret's invention. As Maddern points out, the power of the provincial gentry

[21] Philippa C. Maddern, 'Honour among the Pastons: Gender and Integrity in Fifteenth-Century English Provincial Society', *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1988), p. 362.

[22] For discussion of the importance of 'worship' among the gentry, see Raluca L. Radulescu, *The Gentry Context for Malory's* Morte Darthur, (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2003), pp. 17-24. For corresponding analysis of the concept of 'fame' in this period, see Thelma Fenster and Daniel Lord Smail, eds., *Fama: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, New York, and London: Cornell University Press, 2003).

was derived from their property, and their feudal duty to support their tenants bound them in a contract of honour.[23] Failure to observe this agreement could certainly inspire the kind of public ignominy identified by Margaret. The Pastons' correspondence often maintains the illusion that the vocabularies used in local and personal disputes were malleable, but in reality, the preservation of fame and honour was based upon a constant negotiation for favour in a highly mutable and often delicate environment.

4.2 Defining disorder

Achieving a balance between personal and public concerns was complicated further by the extreme political conditions of the mid-fifteenth century. It was common for landowners and lords to come into conflict in the provinces, but during the reigns of Henry VI and Edward IV, factional allegiances inflected these disputes. The intrusion of national politics into provincial affairs registers in the way that local disturbances are described, often being elevated from personal struggles to more significant accounts of disorder. In her second appeal to John II to defend Caister, Margaret Paston states that his intervention is especially required

> in eschewing of insurreccions, with othere inconuenyens þat be like to growe with-in the shire of Norffolk, this trobelows werd, be-cause of such conuenticles and gaderynges with-in the seid shire. (1: 344)

The situation at Caister was not only turning ugly for the Pastons but threatened to affect order throughout the county. 'Conuenticles' and 'gaderynges' referred to the banding together of individuals, representing the fragmentation of local politics which could lead to the outbreak of widespread 'insurreccions'. Margaret's use of official legal terminology to represent this situation indicates that levels of local unrest were rising. As the limits of tolerance were tested, previously acceptable expressions of unrest became politically charged. This in turn complicated how disorder was evaluated, making the re-establishment of order increasingly difficult.

For the Pastons, the official terms used to categorise deviance were authoritative designations of wrongdoing that they expected to be taken seriously.

[23] Maddern, 'Honour among the Pastons', pp. 359-61.

Whereas the language used in minor local disturbances and family disputes could be treated flexibly, official terms for misconduct were applied more strictly. Because the terms represented the authorised vocabulary of legal and royal correspondence, their application worked to restore structure and uphold justice when normal standards had been disrupted. Both William Paston I and his son John Paston I were trained in the law and made frequent recourse to legal terminology in their description of disorder. Margaret was apparently familiar with these terms from her husband's correspondence, and as Watt observes, may also have gained experience of how they were applied through her attendance at the shire court and involvement in delivering writs and obtaining warrants for the family.[24] John II's time spent at court in 1461 permitted him to form political attachments that increased the family's participation in official political dialogues. Yet a fluent command of these languages did not necessarily guarantee that they were always received or acted upon with the same conviction. In order to take effect, the political and legal codes from which these vocabularies were drawn had to be commonly respected and upheld.

From the mid-fifteenth century, the representative capacities of traditional legal terms were tested by mounting disorder and the increasing intertwinement of local and national politics. A series of petitions sent to the king and council between 1449 and 1454 illustrate these circumstances. The petitions were composed during particularly disturbed years in Norfolk as supporters of the Duke of Suffolk consolidated their power. The Pastons were prime targets for this group because of their position in the county. Beginning in 1449, John Paston I complained bitterly to the Crown for redress against the 'mysdoeres and riotous people' who had expelled his family from the manor of Gresham in February 1448, and continued to commit

> gret insurreccyon, ryottis, and wrongis, and dayly continuans ther-of, so heinously don a-geyn your crowne, dignite and peas shuld not be your hye myght be duly punysshid, it shall gefe grett boldnesse to them and alle oder mysdoeres to make congregacyouns and conuenticles riotously, on-abille to be seysed, to the subuersyon and finall distruccyon of your liege peple and lawes. (1: 53)

The dense vocabulary employed in the account attempts to represent how persistent disorderly activities were in the county. By using terms in multiples, and offsetting

[24] Watt, 'No Writing', pp. 124-5.

them with direct commands for redress, the possibility that such disorder might overrun the kingdom appears more realistic. Although the construction appears exaggerated, the number of like accounts produced by John Paston in the period appears to indicate that such turmoil was a genuine experience.[25] Moreover, the delay in receiving intercession from the Crown also meant that Paston found himself not only having to repeat his pleas but also having to prescribe their remedy. In a petition to the Chancellor in 1450, John Paston demanded the issue of

> an oyer and determiner ayenst þe seid Lord Molens, John Heidon, and other of the seid riotous peple in like fourme to be named, to enquire, here, and determyn all trespaces, extorcions, riottes, forcible entrees, mayntenaunces, champarties, embraceries, offenses, and misprisions by hem or ony of hem doen. (1: 56)

Once again repetition proclaims the urgency and gravity of the situation at hand. By listing the crimes collectively, Paston was aiming for maximum impact as he confronted the Chancellor with the degree of deviant activity conducted by these individuals. However, in relying upon traditional legal formulae, the sheer proliferation of similar claims from across the country meant that it was all too easy to dismiss them.

The nonchalance of Henry VI's government towards rising local disorder caused John I to attempt different tactics in his petitions. A number of drafts and memoranda survive for these petitions, probably kept as records. The existence of these rough copies, sometimes alongside their final copies, illustrates the processes behind their composition. Several of the petitions drafted between 1452 and 1454

[25] This of course does not mean that the Pastons' experience is representative of the whole of Norfolk or that levels of disorder did not fluctuate; as Maddern observes in her study of violence in Norfolk: 'A search through that reputed repository of tales of terrible violence, the Paston letters, yields (from the 1,288 pages of the Davis edition, spanning the years 1424 to 1518) a grand total of thirty-six references to violence involving the Pastons or their East Anglian neighbours, even including such trivialities as the injured hand sustained by John Paston II in a friendly tourney at Eltham. If we add the reports of battles, executions and piracy which reached the Pastons from the rest of Britain and France, the total rises to seventy instances; but even this is surely not unduly alarming'. Philippa C. Maddern, *Violence and Social Order: East Anglia 1422-1442*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 5. However, more recently, some historians have argued that the level of violence experienced in the fifteenth century as a result of the national breakdown in order should be increased. See Radulescu, *Gentry Context*, p. 16, quoting Christine Carpenter, *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 13-14, and Montgomery L. Bohna, 'Political and Criminal Violence in Fifteenth-Century England', in *Violence in Medieval Society*, ed. Richard W. Kaeuper, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), pp. 91-104.

concern the riotous activities of Robert Ledham. In a draft petition to the Lords in 1452, John I had complained of how Ledham and his associates were

> assemblyng and gadderyng to hem gret multitude of mysrewled people, [and] kepe a frunture and a forslet at the hows of the seid Robert Ledeham and issu ought at her pleser, sumtyme vj, sumtyme xij, sumtyme xxx and mo, armed, jacked, and salettyd, wyth bowis, arwys, speris, and bylles, and over-ride the contré and oppresse the people and do many orible and abhomynable dedis lyke to the distruccion of the shire of Norffolk wythoute the Kyng owre sovereyn lord seth it redressed. (1: 59)

The concluding plea for redress was rather desperate by this time, but John's emphasis upon the violent gangland behaviour being blatantly perpetrated in the county attempts to approach the situation from a different perspective. By detailing how Ledham and his gang had formed an illicit conclave within his house, Paston qualifies his use of terms such as 'congragacyouns' and 'conuenticles'. In addition, his detailed delineation of their military apparel and weaponry confirms their wicked intentions, and also reinforces the notion that, in their warlike attitude, they posed an immediate threat to the safety of the county.[26] The fact that John I concluded his description with a list of assaults that Ledham's marauding gang had carried out upon the local population, indicates that he had probably used memoranda notes to compile the account. Rather than treat a single event, the account outlines an extensive catalogue of violence and intimidation.

Recalling violent conduct also generated its own particular deviant vocabulary. Such language is prominent in John III's account of the behaviour of John Grey and John Burgeys in 1467:

> they be Yeluertons kapteyns, and they ryd and go dayly, as well in Norwyche as in othyr plasys of yours and othyr menys in the contré, in ther trossyng dowbelettys, wyth bombardys and kanonys and chauseuelyns, and do what so euer they wyll in the contré. Ther dar no pore man dysplese theym, for what so euyr they do wyth ther swordys they make it lawe. (1: 532)

[26] J. G. Bellamy has noted how, after the middle of the thirteenth century, it was illegal for bands of retainers to carry arms. Although Paston does not specifically identify Ledham's behaviour as riotous, his presentation is clearly informed by fears that such conduct is linked to forcible entry. For an outline of the changing nature of riot legislation in the medieval period, see J. G. Bellamy, *Criminal Law and Society in Late Medieval and Tudor England*, (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984), chap. 4.

Where the description realises its impact is in the connection drawn between the men's martial attire and weaponry and their perversion of the law. The items are treated as symbols of violence which override accepted legal order. As William Yelverton's 'kapteyns' they quite literally represent an invasion force that was overpowering the county. Such behaviour would not have been exceptional if it was only a symptom of a local feud, but the distinctive linguistic status established for these actions suggests that the situation was more serious. This reading is reinforced by the way that the vocabulary overlaps with other tropes used to depict deviant actions. Uprisings and their leaders were commonly represented as military groups led by captains. These labels acknowledge the military array of the rebels and signify their insurgent force. Captains of rebellions could both be genuine leaders or be designated as such in order to focus liability. Such is the case regarding a local rising that occurred in 1452. In John I's petitions the rising is attributed to Roger Church, but in a draft petition from 1454 responsibility had been shifted to Ledham:

> the sayd Roger Ledham...callyd vnto hym his sayd misgoverned fellowship consydryng the absence of many of the well-rewlyd people of the sayd hundred of affere-cast malice, and congected, purposed, and labored to the sheriff of the shire that the sayd Rogere Chirche, on of the sayd riotous felawshipp, was made bailly of the hundred, and affer caused the same Rogger to be begynnere of arysyng and to take oppon hym to be captain, and to excite the peple of the counttrey þerto. (1: 78-9)

By including details about the origins of the riot and the role of its instigators, the account seeks to present a conclusive account of events. Although clearly refining his earlier depictions and interpretations, John I's revisions amount to more than just the addition of new evidence. Having already intimidated the local authorities with 'affere-cast malice', Ledham's manipulation of the sheriff to have Church installed as bailiff of the hundred and his subsequent excitation of the revolt reveal a concerted effort to infiltrate the positions of local power. In substantiating these claims, the language of conspiracy and military operation seeks to show how this 'riotous felawshipp' was establishing itself as an alternative power structure.

Local riots were common in the 1450s, providing ample precedent for the use of such language. However, definitions of deviance were not only a response to unrest

but were also influenced by it. Cade's revolt exerted a particularly strong effect upon the popular imagination, influencing how popular protest was subsequently perceived and depicted. In a letter from William Wayte to John Paston I on 3 January 1451, Wayte relates how Blake, the bailiff of Swaffham, had relayed the conversation that he had with the Chancellor on behalf of their master, William Yelverton. Blake was especially concerned to emphasise the public outcry that would arise if the notorious troublemakers and henchmen of the Duke of Suffolk, Thomas Tuddenham and John Heydon, were pardoned:

> he told my seyd lord Chaunceler and many mo lordes þat yf þe Kinge pardon hym or graunted any supersedeas London shuld with-jnne short tyme have as meche for to do as they hadde for to kepe London Brygge whanne þe Capteyn cam thedyr, for he told hym þat ther was vp in Norffolk redy to ryse v m and moo yf they have not execucion of þe oyre and terminer. (2: 61)

That such discontent might explode into insurrection is realised by Blake's reference to the turning point in Cade's revolt when the rebels were climactically overthrown in the battle upon London Bridge. Accounts of the confrontation feature in every vernacular chronicle account of the rising, revealing how decisive, but also hazardous, the event was considered. Norfolk's involvement in the Cade rebellion was nowhere near as marked as that of Kent, but its fractious political environment marked it as being equally unstable. In the aftermath of the revolt official suspicions were certainly strong enough for a quarter of Cade to be sent to the county as a deterrent against following the example of the Kentish rebels.[27]

However, the impact of displays of public punishment in Norfolk was compromised by transgressors such as Tuddenham and Heydon. Although the oyer and determiner was commissioned against the pair, it only succeeded in polarising local politics further by generating a series of counter-indictments. According to Margaret Paston who wrote to her husband on 3 March 1451:

> there is a greet noyse in þis town þat my lord of Oxforth and Yelverton and ye ben endytid in Kent for mayntenyng of þe oyredetermyner, and

[27] The quarter was placed on the city gates of Norwich by the mayor and sheriffs of the town on 17 July 1450. Blackheath, Salisbury, and Gloucester were the recipients of the other quarters, in each case marking their involvement in the revolt or sympathy with its aims. Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 100.

> Jon Damme is endyted þere also of treson be-cawse þat he dede
> Heydon endytyn of treson for taking down of þe quarter of the man.
> And the pepyll þat ben ayens Sere Thomas Todenham and Heydon ben
> sore aferd be-cawse of þis noyse and of oþer langage that is had boþe
> in þis town and in þe contré þat þese seyd Todenham and Heydon
> shuld ben as well at ese and haue as grett rewill as euer they hadde.
> (1: 238)

Most peculiar in the account is the comment that 'Jon Damme is endyted þere also of treson be-cawse þat he dede Heydon endytyn of treson for taking down of þe quarter of the man'. Given Heydon's precarious political morals it is unlikely that Damme's accusation was unsubstantiated, raising the question of why he removed the quarter and for what purpose.[28] That Heydon may have intended some kind of symbolic use of the quarter is borne out by the fact that the memory of Cade was being used to powerful effect in other suspicious activities in the county. When John Paston sent a petition to the Chancellor in 1452 detailing how Roger Church and his fellowship were discrediting local men by rumouring that they were planning a rising against the king, he alleged that this 'mysse-rewled and encredibill man' had established his leadership by 'seyng to summe of the same feleshep he had remembred a gode name for here capteyn, that shuld be John A-mend Alle' (1: 63).[29] As Harvey points out, Church's rising was not an attempt to reinitiate Cade's demands for governmental reform, but a calculated attempt to indict innocent men of participation in a rising and have them brought before the Duke of Norfolk.[30] Cade's rebellion was generally depicted by contemporaries as having possessed legitimate grievances and intentions which had been overthrown by descent into disorder, robbery and murder. For Heydon and Church, their associations with Cade trod a more ambiguous path. Their approach to Cade drew upon the deviance inherent in the action of rebellion and was used to endorse their own reign of tyranny and subjection, totally inverting the popular ideals of justice which Cade had come to symbolise.

[28] *Bale's Chronicle* reports that one of Cade's quarters suffered a similar fate: 'the Sonday ij day of August...was a quarter of the capitaigne which was set at Deptford strond stolen and borne away'. Flenley, *Six Town Chronicles*, p. 134. It is possible that either necromancy or popular superstition about the magical properties of these fragments was responsible for their requisition.

[29] It is interesting that in his draft petition to the Lords, which was also made in 1452, John Paston makes a similar account of Church's rising but omits the reference to his calling himself 'John A-mend Alle' (1: 58-62). Perhaps because the petition to the Chancellor was solely concerned with the rising such detail was deemed more significant to mention.

[30] Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, pp. 161-2.

All rebellions challenged order and authority, but in this instance it is clear that popular politics and communal memories were being abused because of their political currency. Those who appropriated Cade's name for self-interested purposes continually reaffirmed and reinvented his deviant identity. Although the 1453 attainder issued by the government against the rebel leader demanded that his remembrance 'be put out of every true Cristen mannys langage and memorie for ever', the power afforded by such seditious associations was not to be easily suppressed.[31] The problem was that as these references became ever more entrenched in relation to alternative power structures, so the traditional vocabularies used to define and combat deviance were rendered increasingly impotent. Reporting these infringements was one thing, but if the corresponding vocabulary was unable to produce due punishment, then their deviant authority remained.

4.3 Courting popular opinion

As traditional legal terminology was tested by the political circumstances of the mid-fifteenth century, finding an effective way to articulate grievances and uphold one's status became paramount. For the Pastons, maintaining their authority in Norfolk against rival factions depended upon their ability to represent themselves in a way that met the expectations of both the government and the local population. It was a pursuit that was complicated by the partiality of the king and the growing political activism of the people. As a result, the Paston letters represent an amalgamation of voices that is symptomatic of the wider linguistic context within which they were written. The vocabulary that emerges is one that increasingly draws upon popular political rhetoric, showing how registers merged as information was relayed between different correspondents. Prominent in the Pastons' accounts of local disorder are terms such as 'trespasses', 'extorsyonys' and 'oppressyonys'. An example of how they were used occurs in January 1462 when Margaret Paston wrote to her husband to inform him about the mounting disaffection surrounding the Duke of Suffolk:

> Pepyll of this contré begynyth to wax wyld, and it is seyd her þat my lord of Clarans and the Dwek of Suthfolk and serteyn jwgys with hem schold come down and syt on syche pepyll as be noysed riotous in thys contré. And also it is seyd her þat ther is retornyd a newe rescwe vp-on

[31] *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, volume 5, (London, 1767-77), p. 265.

> þat that was do at the last scher. I suppose swyche talking comyth of false schrewys þat wold mak a rwmor in þis contré. The pepyll seyth her þat they had leuyr go vp hole to the Kyng and compleyne of siche fals schrewys as they haue be wrongyd by a-for than they schold be compleyned of with-owt cause and be hangyd at ther owne dorys. In good feyth men fer sor her of a comone rysyng but if a bettyr remedy may be had to pese the pepyll in hast, and that ther be sent swyche downe to tak a rewyll as the pepyll hathe a fantsy in that wole be jndeferent. They loue not in no wyse the Dwke of Sowthfolk nor hys modyr. They sey that all the treytourys and extorsyonerys of thys contré be meynteyned by them and by syche as they get to them wyth her goodys, to that intent to meynteyn such extorsyon style as hath be do by suche as hathe had the rewyll vndyr them be-for-tyme…I herd nevyr sey of so myche robry and manslawt in thys contré as is now with-in a lytyll tyme. (1: 279)

Here the designation of 'treytourys' and 'extorsyonerys' represents the outcry of the people rather than just official phrasing. Although the Pastons' application of the terms represents an attempt to focus and refine popular comment, the possibility remains that their significance and meaning were commonly understood. The protracted experience of disorder in the county bred an environment where popular political consciousnesses could become highly developed, enabling the people to pressurise the authorities with their outcry and threats of rebellion. Margaret's intentions may have been to expose the 'fals schrewys' who were disrupting local order but her observations about the extent of popular discontent also indicates the political presence of the people.

The ability to direct popular disaffection could have a decisive impact upon the outcome of local power struggles. During their ongoing contest for power with Tuddenham and Heydon, malicious rumours were frequently concocted in an attempt to diminish popular support for the family.[32] Defamatory rumour-mongering was actionable at law, a point which John Paston I emphasised when he sent a copy of the Statute of Westminster's stipulations against *scandalum magnatum* to John Pampyng, Richard Calle, and John Wykes in 1463, stressing that its clauses were 'god inow to take accicouns by'. On an unofficial level, William Wayte wrote to John Paston I in

[32] Although Tuddenham was finally executed in February 1462, Heydon was pardoned and continued to maintain his grudges against Norwich's civic elite and the Paston family; Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, pp. 46-7, 182.

October 1450 with advice about how a show of popular support could be used to discredit Tuddenham and Heydon to the Duke of York:

> it is noon oþer remedye but late Swhafham men be warned to mete with my seyd lord on Fryday nest coming ate Pykenham on horssebak in þe most goodly wyse, and putte sum bylle vn-to my lord of Syr Thomas Tudenham, Heydon, and Prentys, and crye owte on hem, and þat all the women of þe same towne be þer also and crye owte on hem also and calle hem extorcionners, and pray my lord þat he wyll do sharp execucyon vp-on hem. And my master counceyll yow that ȝe ryde ayens my lord, and þat þer ben madde byllez and putte them vp to my lord, and late all þe towne cry owte on Heydon, Todenham, Wyndham, and Prentys, and of all here fals mayntenours, and telle my lord how meche hurte þei have don to þe cetye, and late yt be don in the most lamentably wyse; for, syr, but yf my lord here sum fowle tales of hem and sum hyddows noys and crye, be my feyth þei arne ellys lyke to come to grace. (2: 47-8)

Wayte's insistence that the people should repeatedly 'crye owte' against their oppressors attempts to harness their vocal power by choreographing a single voice of protest. Achieving this effect demands a certain amount of prescription: not only must the people 'calle hem extorcionners' – a term that came readily to their lips – but it must 'be don in the most lamentably wyse', amounting to a 'hyddows noys and crye'. By structuring popular protest in this manner, Wayte was capitalising upon the emotional dimensions of popular complaint. It is possible that Wayte took his precedent in advising this affective approach from the recent bill submitted by the Duke of York to the King, a copy of which he included with his letter. Wayte further requested that John I 'late copyes go abowte the cetye j-now' (2: 49), indicating that its public dissemination would assist the Pastons' cultivation of public favour. York's opening depiction of the injustice suffered in the realm certainly correlated with experiences in Norwich:

> Please it youre Hyghnes tenderly to considere the grett grutchyng and romore that is vniuersaly in this youre reame of þat justice is nouth dewly ministrid to such as trespass and offende a-yens youre lawes, and in special of them that ben endited of treson and oþer being openly noysed of the same. (2: 49)

With its emphasis upon championing the common people and their voice, York's letter bears the hallmark rhetoric of later Yorkist campaigns.[33] As the Pastons came to sympathise with the Yorkist cause, their discourse of the commonweal must have increasingly coloured their perception of the political status of the language of the common people.

Yet although opinion could be manipulated to serve factional politics, provoking popular protest could be a risky strategy. Because of the unstable conditions within which popular political comment was formulated, it was a highly volatile medium. The unpredictability of popular sentiment often manifested at public events where local politics and high feelings collided to produce explosive outbursts. After a meeting at the shire hall on 29 December 1461, Richard Calle wrote to John Paston I to tell him how the erroneous report of a forthcoming election had resulted in uproar:

> Like you to witte on Childremasse Daye there were moche people at Norwich at the shire, be-cauce it was noyced in the shire that the vndresheriff had a writte to make a newe aleccion; wherefore the people was greved be-cauce thay had labored so often, seyng to the sheriff that he had the writte and pleynly he schulde not a-wey vnto the tyme the writte were redd. The sheriff answerd and seyd that he had no writte, nor west who had it. Hervppon the people peacyd and stilled vnto the tyme the shire was done, and after that done the people called vppon hym, 'Kylle hym, heede hym!' And so John Dam, with helpe of other, gate hym out of the schirehows and with moche labour brought hym in-to Sporyer Rowe. And there the people mett a-yenst hym and to convey hem a-wey, or ell he had be slayne. (2: 261)

Who was responsible for spreading the rumour about the election is not apparent, but its effect was electric. The legality of elections had become an issue after the long-running controversy over Thomas Wetherby's fraudulent practices whilst mayor of Norwich in the 1440s.[34] Appearing to be faced with another case of deception, the people evidently intended to rectify the injustice by taking the law into their own

[33] On the use of the common voice by the Yorkist supporters, see John Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century*, (London: Blandford Press, 1971), esp. pp. 173-217; Wendy Scase, 'Writing and the 'Poetics of Spectacle': Political Epiphanies in *The Arrivall of Edward IV* and some Contemporary Lancastrian and Yorkist Texts,' in *Images, Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and the Visual Image*, ed. Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.172-184.

[34] For contemporary accounts of 'Wetherby's contention', see W. Hudson, and J. C. Tingey, eds., *The Records of the City of Norwich*, (London and Norwich: Jarrold and Sons, 1906), vol. 1, p. 334.

hands and declaring the undersheriff a traitor. Calle casts the people's outrage as a result of the 'noised' election, but their reaction also admits a more autonomous motivation. Clearly their response was informed by an understanding of the kinds of political knowledge that should be made public, and of the role that the common people played in such formal political occasions. The disturbance that broke out because of the supposed denial of these rights was more than reactionary: it was a statement of the common people's awareness of the political influence that their voice could command.

Opinions about the riot were divided among the Paston correspondents. According to Margaret Paston, the commotion was an unprovoked obstacle to the smooth-running of the shire's business: 'Here was an evyll rewlyd felawschep yestyrday at the schere, and fard ryth fowle wyth þe vndyr-scheryfe, and on-resnably as I herd sey' (1: 278). Thomas Playter alternatively placed the blame with the individual who was foolhardy enough to attempt to mislead the people:

> at þe last shire was moche pepoll and ille gouerned, for they wold not be rewled be no body. They had almost a slayne the vnderschryf, for they told hym wryttes of eleccion was sent doun and he kept it on side to be-gyle hem and to make hem labour a-yen; and ther-for he that kepyth it is to blame, me thynketh. (2: 262-3)

However, Playter's reasoning was influenced by the main subject of his letter: William Yelverton's rulings at the last sessions of the peace. The judge had reported that the king considered the county's unrest to be a product of a minority, and had urged the people to state their grievances through lawful bills of complaint rather than resorting to riots. Shortly following the decree, Playter reported that

> there was a bylle set vp-on the shirehous dore, and the content ther-of was but of the fauour to you ward...and of the hatered of the oþer; it was but of sum lewde disposed person, it semeth. (2: 263)

It is also likely that the 'oþer' party refers to Tuddenham and Heydon, whom the king had requested to be especially mentioned at the sessions to show his impartiality. The meaning of 'lewde' probably indicated the ignorance of the bill-caster rather than their malicious intent, but either way, the anonymous posting of the bill contravened the king's pronouncement. By failing to deliver the document personally, the writer

was eschewing responsibility for his allegations and therefore avoiding any potential reprisal. Despite dismissing the bill, Playter's decision to mention it may denote that it was being popularly discussed, especially in light of the episode at the shire hall. Clearly although the Pastons often talk about the common people as a body to be placated or canvassed to obtain support, the fact that they also discussed popular politics in their letters means that they were as much participants as they were spectators. Such fluidity complicates the definition of the languages associated with popular political expression. Although the reaction of the people at the shire hall could be categorised as disorderly behaviour, determining the status of the rumour of the writ and the subsequent anonymous bill-posting was more difficult.

The Pastons' engagement with popular politics indicates a situation where the common voice was an unstable force. Maintaining positions of influence in the localities was always reliant upon popular support, but the general breakdown of order and standards of governance meant that relationships began to change. Just as the common people were manipulated to gain support, their recognition of their political power meant that they could also exert pressure to force actions and decisions. The local disruption experienced in Norfolk was symptomatic of the wider destabilisation of authority occurring in the realm as the balance of power altered. In this environment it was not only the elite that were searching for an effective vocabulary to articulate their grievances and assert their position. As factions formed and the relationships between different social groups became increasingly politicised, the resort to opprobrious language in the form of rumour and seditious speech encouraged the formation of independent, and potentially deviant, identities. Consequently, the Pastons' attempts to shape popular politics and manage the common people were outgrowths of a broader revision of the way that linguistic deviance was perceived and evaluated.

4.4 The politics of report

In a series of statutes and proclamations, successive fifteenth-century governments sought to outlaw the expression of sedition in speech and writing.[35] Yet

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[35] On the legislation against bill-casters passed in 1431, see Richmond, 'Hand and Mouth', 233. For details of the proclamation passed against schedules, bills and libels in 1450, see Scase, 'Bill-Casting',

as national politics degenerated into civil war in the mid fifteenth century the affairs of the Crown became a common talking point. For families like the Pastons whose social position meant that they had a stake in the outcome of this national drama, such discussion was more than just idle speculation. Access to accurate information was always crucial in the hazardous world of political intrigue, but as national politics fragmented into factional divisions, the availability of news and questions about its reliability pervaded the letters. These concerns were augmented by anxieties about the incriminating nature of certain information, raising issues about how it should be represented and what language should be used. Despite these anxieties, the Pastons continued to seek information for the primary purpose of achieving political advantage. As such, their misgivings about their situation need to be balanced by consideration of their attempts to manipulate news and its representation. In discussing national politics in their letters, different linguistic concerns converged, spotlighting the pressures that made writing about current affairs a political activity.[36]

In comparison with the way that personal issues and local events were related in the Pastons' letters, the rehearsal of second-hand news about national politics assumes both a distinct vocabulary and a particular narrative structure. It is unusual for the Paston correspondents to be predominantly concerned with the relay of political information beyond that which immediately affected them, but a letter sent by James Gresham to John Paston I on 28 October 1455 is one exception. Written at a point when the factional divisions in the government were beginning to mark degeneration into more profound national disorder, the letter recounts a mixture of sensational news and rumours arising from the country's political instability. As Gresham made clear to his master, he was writing in a climate of extreme uncertainty:

> Here be many mervaylous tales of thyngges that shall fall þis next moneth, as it is seid; for it is talked þat oon Doktour Grene, a preest, hath kalked and reporteth þat by-fore Seynt Andreu Day next coming shall be þe grettest bataill þat was sith þe bataill of Shrewisbury, and it shall falle bytwene þe Bisshoppis Inne of Salesbury and Westminster barres, and þere shall deye vij lordes, wherof iij shuld be bisshoppes.

228-30. On the reinforcement of the Statute of Winchester and legislation against false rumours by Richard III in 1484 and 1485, see Armstrong, 'Distribution and Speed of News', pp. 101-2.

[36] Although the extant letter collections of other contemporary families make little comment about the events of the Wars of the Roses, as Hanham points out of the Cely letters, this may well be due to their reliance upon oral communication to discuss national politics; *Celys and their World*, p. 23-4.

> Al this and meche more is talked and reported. I trust to God it shall not falle so. (2: 126)

Insecurity breeds rumour and suspicion, and the pressure of these conditions made prophecies a substitute for reliable information.[37] Indeed, the prevalence of omens like these in the period underlines the pervasiveness of political discussion and popular apprehension at a time of social volatility. The misgivings raised by such speculation test Gresham's ability to determine correct information, so that the foremost impression produced by his letter is his apprehension of future events.

Perhaps the most disturbing item in Gresham's letter is his report of the murder of Nicholas Radford, one of Lord Bonville's councillors, who had become implicated in a variance between his master and the Earl of Devonshire. Gresham recounts how Devonshire's son came to Radford's property after dark on 23 October with sixty men, set fire to a dwelling by the gates in order to gain entry to Radford's house, and then demanded an audience with him. The ensuing dialogue is relayed by Gresham in the form in which he heard it in order to preserve as many of the details of the disgraceful incident as possible:

> th'Erll sone forseid entred into þe place and intreted Radford to come doun of his chamber to speke wyth them, promyttyng hym that he shuld no bodyly harm have; up-on which promysse he come doun and spak wyth þe seid Erll sone.
> In þe mene tyme his menye robbe his chambre and ryfled his houses, and trussed suyche as they coude gete to-gyddir and caryed it awey on his own hors. Thanne th'Erll sone seid, 'Radford, thou must come to my lord my fadir.' He seid he wold, and bad oon of his men make redy his hors to ride wyth hem, whiche answerd hym þat alle his hors wern take awey. Thanne he seid to þ'Erll sone, 'Ser, your men haue robbed my chambre, and thei haue myn hors þat I may not ride wyth you to my lord your fadir; wherfor I prey you lete me ride, for I am old and may not go.' It was answered hym ageyn þat he shuld walke forth wyth them [...] and so he dede till he was a flyte shote or more from his place, and þanne he was [...] softly for cawse he might not go fast. And whanne þei were thus departed he turned [...] anoon forwyth come ix men ageyn up-on hym and smot hym in þe hed and fellid [...] oon of them kyt his throte. This was told to my lord Chaunceler þis

[37] The *English Chronicle* provides an excellent example of the way that omens and portents were used to produce an interpretative scheme in the interpretation of events arising from mid-fifteenth century national politics; see *An English Chronicle of the Reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI*, ed. John S. Davies, (London: Camden Society, 1856).

> fornoon [...] massangeres as come of purpose owt of þe same cuntré. This matier is take gretly [...] (2: 126-7)

Damage to the manuscript prevents the whole conversation from being fully understood, but what remains offers a striking account of how Radford was purposefully led away from his house to be murdered. The events are structured to provide maximum contrast between the conduct of the two protagonists: whilst Devonshire's son was issuing promises not to harm Radford, his men were looting his house, and despite Radford's mild acquiescence to these infringements and obvious infirmity, he was left to be butchered by Devonshire's men. With its emphasis upon the violence meted upon Radford, this presentation reinforces the traumatic nature of the attack. The escalation of the dispute into cold-blooded murder was a step too far, a judgment that is acknowledged by the speed with which news of the murder was disseminated. Gresham states that the messengers that rode to inform the Chancellor of the crime arrived in London on the 'fornoon' of 28 October – only five days after the event had taken place.[38] His assertion that the 'matier is take gretly' may be incomplete, but it emphasises just how perilous such noble disputes could be when left to spiral out of control.

Even more alarming were popular fears about the implications of Radford's murder, potentially heralding a breakdown into anarchy. Gresham's retelling of the event is especially sensational when considered in relation to the other information reported with it. Of these accounts, it is the uncertainties arising from recent political events that particularly influence Gresham's outlook:

> [...]t passd at ij after midnight rod owt of London as it is seid more þanne [...] þe best wyse. Summe seyn it was to ride toward my lord of York, and summe [...]k. So meche rumour is here; what it menyth I wot not. God turne it [...].
> [...] at Hertford, and summe men ar a-ferd that he is seek ageyn. I prey God [...] my lordes of York, Warwyk, Salesbury, and oþer arn in purpose to conveye hym [...]e, &c. The seid N. Crome, berar her-of, shall telle you suyche tydyngges. (2: 127)

[38] Armstrong has proved by other similar examples that this five day turnaround was the usual length of time required for news to reach London from Devon. In the case of Radford's murder, this would mean a journey of roughly 185 miles from Poughill in Devon travelling to London via Exeter. See Armstrong, 'Distribution and Speed of News', p. 114, and pp. 97-122 for comparative examples of the speed of news travel in the period.

It is difficult to discern what the first report concerns due to the manuscript's damage, but the statement in the second that 'summe men ar a-ferd that he is seek ageyn' refers to fears that the king had been stricken by a second nervous breakdown. The lack of a figurehead in the government, however inept a king Henry was, aroused anxieties about how crimes which arose from noble feuds would be resolved. Gresham's fears that the situation may not be rectifiable are manifested in his repeated invocations for divine intervention. His inability to discern the significance of events or their future course means that he is forced to rely upon rumour, but as he admits, 'what it menyth I wot not'. Such a pervasive lack of clarity and direction in national affairs indicates why the receipt of news became such a significant and controversial pursuit from the 1450s onwards.

It is thus unsurprising that correspondents often mark their 'tyddynges' as the most significant part of their letters. In an attempt to qualify the uncertainties surrounding their information, the writers often make specific comments about the source of their news, including the identity of the teller, their contacts, or the place where the information was heard. When Thomas Playter wrote to John Paston I on 18 April 1460 with news of the events that would lead to the deposition of Henry VI, he used a very particular style of report that indicates the principles he employed to judge the veracity of his information:

> as for tydyng, it is noysed and told for trouth of men of worchip and oþer that þe Erle of Wylchyre is taken, Doctour Moorton and Doctour Makerell, and be brougth to þe Kyng at York. Maister William also spak with a man that sey hem.
> Item, ser, I herd of Ser John Borceter and Cristofer Hanson that Herry the Sext is jn a place in York-schire is called Corcumbre; suche a name it hath, or muche lyke…Item, it is talked now for trouthe þe Erle of Northumberland is ded.
> Item, þe Erle of Devenschire is ded justely…Item, sum men talke Lord Wellys, Lord Wyllouby, and Skales ben on lyve.
>
> (2: 229-30)

Playter's opening phrase, 'it is noysed and told for trouth of men of worchip', instantly sets the tone of his account. The truth of the information that he is relaying is substantiated by it having been imparted by honourable men, and is often supported by further attestations of its reliability with named references. Beyond the concern to verify this information, however, it is the succinct and concise style of address used in

the report that evidences how critical such information was. The account reads like a memorandum, being structured simply as a list of significant information. Under the pressures of the contemporary political situation, narrative conventions became truncated, privileging the decisiveness of report.

Critical turning points like the events of 1460 to some extent generated their own representational forms because of the urgency of the situation. A similar effect can be witnessed again in the early 1470s when Edward IV regained the throne and consolidated his position with the final deposition of Henry VI. For John Paston II and John Paston III, their untimely decision to switch allegiances at the battle of Barnet on 10 April 1470 spelled a potentially disastrous fall from grace. Their disquiet is partly registered in the way that John II alluded to Fauconberg's failed rising in Kent in a letter to his brother written on 15 September 1471: 'I vndrestonde þat Bastarde Fauconbryg is owther hedyd or lyke to be, and hys brother bothe. Some men seye he wolde haue deseruyd it, and som sey naye' (1: 440).[39] His equivocal judgment represents a case of 'extratextual competence': John III was well aware of his brother's opinion, but the volatile political situation prevented either from expressing it.[40] Other comments made by John II in his letter reinforce the sense of matters left unsaid:

> I herde yister-daye þat a worsted man of Norffolk and my lady wer on pylgrymage at Owre Lady on foote, and so they went to Caster; and þat at Norwyche on scholde haue had large langage to yow and callyd yow traytore, and pyked many quarellys to yow. Sende me word ether-off. It were well doo þat ye wer a lytell sewere off yowre pardon than ye be. Auyse yow; I deme ye woll her-afftre ellys repent yow. (1: 440)

Public discussion of John III's political situation heightened the dangers of any further indiscretions, making it especially important that clarification of his royal standing was achieved soon. Yet it was not only John III's life that was endangered by this turn of events; the position of the whole family was also jeopardised by his political

[39] For an account of Fauconberg's rising, see Colin F. Richmond, 'Fauconberg's Kentish Rising of May 1471', *English Historical Review* 85 (1970), 673-92.

[40] The phrase 'extratextual competence' is used by Patrizia Violi to describe how correspondents codify references to their shared knowledge of events in their correspondence; Violi, 'Letters', p. 158.

gamble. John II was particularly clear in his stipulations that his brother should take good 'auyse' about his conduct, and especially his language:

> I pray yow be ware off yowr guydyng, and in chyff off yowre langage, so þat fro hense forthe by yowr langage noo man parceyue þat ye fauor any person contrary to þe Kynges pleasure. (1: 440)

Fear of following Fauconberg's example made distancing the family from any partisan associations a pressing concern.

Edward IV's triumph at the battle of Barnet not only meant that the Pastons were left in a dangerous position, but reintroduced a general feeling of political uncertainty as the balance of power shifted again. Four days after the battle of Barnet, John II wrote to his mother with the advice that she should tell his cousin Lomnor:

> to be well ware off hys delyng ore langage as yit, for the worlde, I ensure yow, is right qweasye, as ye schall knowe with-in thys monythe. The peple here feerythe it soore. God hathe schewyd hym-selffe marvelouslye, lyke hym þat made all and can vndoo ageyn whan hym lyst; and I kan thynke þat by all lyklyod schall schewe hym-sylff as mervylous ageyn, and þat in schort tyme, and as I suppose offtere then onys in casis lyke...Be nat adoghted off the worlde, for I trust all schall be well. Iff it thusse contenewe I ame not all vndon, nere noon off vs. (1: 438)

The need to watch what was said in these 'qweasye' conditions causes John's concluding optimism to sit uneasily against his powerful cautionary opening, conveying well the nervousness that was felt across the country about the future. Edward's second assumption of the throne in 1470 was conducted in a far more fragmented political world than his first in 1460. Unease was felt across the country in the early 1470s as the king sought to consolidate his position. As a result, the Pastons often refer to the news of the period as taking the form of 'flyeng tales', a term that captures the fleeting and unreliable nature of the rumours that circulated.[41] Whereas earlier letters tend to express the writer's surety about their information, those composed in the early 1470s are usually accompanied by phrases that stress their indecision and insecurity, such as 'what wyll fall men can nott seye' or 'I cannot telle

[41] For instance, John Paston II to John Paston III (16 April 1473, 1: 460), John Paston II to John Paston III (18 May 1473, 1: 462), and John Paston III to Margaret Paston (5 July 1471, 1: 566).

yow what woll falle off the worlde'.[42] Used in conjunction with current affairs, the phrases reveal how crucial and yet also how difficult it was to stay one step ahead of political developments. James Gresham reported despairingly to John II in early April 1471 that 'here in þis cuntre be many tales and non accorth with other' (2: 405), illustrating just how fruitless the exercise had become. His frustration is different from that expressed in 1455 when he wrote of Radford's murder. There his pleas for divine intervention have a spontaneous sound, whereas the observations of worldly instability heard in letters from the 1470s are recurring and almost habitual.

In addition to influencing the way that the Pastons conveyed news, national politics also had a profound impact upon the way that they approached their correspondence. Many of the letters intimate that the report given is only a brief rendition, with the details either being trusted to the messenger to impart or deferred until a face-to-face meeting. Such is indicated by James Gloys' statement to John Paston I in a letter written on 2 March 1451, where he informed him:

> Item, there were ij men at John Betes of Holt. Thei had langage of the Lord Moleyns. If it please yow to enquire of Symond, bryngere of this letter, he shall enforme you of here langage. (2: 68)

The physical exertion required to write repeated long reports of events naturally means that the writers of the Paston letters frequently admit that their accounts are truncated because there was simply 'too much to write now'. Yet it is also clear that Gloys's possession of information about Lord Moleyns, one of the Pastons' enemies, introduces a political dimension to his letter which is only emphasised by his holding back the full report. The balance between oral and written report thus marks an important divide between what could and could not be said. On occasions when these boundaries had to be breached, special instructions were issued. Margaret Paston wrote to John Paston III in 1471 in a state of great unease:

> send me word how that your brothere doth. It was told here that he shuld haue be ded...Also it was told me this day that ye were hurt be affray that was mad vp-on you be feles disgysed...for Goddes love lete your brothere and ye be ware how þat ye walken and with what

[42] For instance, John Paston II to John Paston III (17 February 1472, 1: 447), John Paston II to John Paston III (20 February 1470, 1: 415), and John Paston II to John Paston III (2 April 1473, 1: 456).

felesshep ye etyn or drynkyn, and in what place; for it was seid here pleynly that your brothere was poysoned.
And this weke was on Drayton wyth me, and told me that there were diuerse of the tenauntes seid that thei wost not what to do if that your brothere come home, and there was on of the Duk of Suffolk men by and bad them not feryn, for his wey shuld be shorted and he shuld come there. Wherfore in any wyse be ware of your-self, for I can thynk thei geve no fors what to do to be wenged and to put you fro your entent that thei myght haue here wyll in Ser John Fastolfes lond. Thy[nk] what gret sorow it [shu]ld be to [m]e and any [...you]. I had leuer ye had neuer know þe lond. Remembre it was þe distruccion of your fader. Trost not mych vp-on promises of lordes now a days that ye shuld be the suerere of þe favour of þer men; for there was a man, and a lordes son, seid but late and toke it for an exaumpill, þat Ser Roberd Harecourt had the good will of the lordes after þer coming in, and yet wyth-in short tyme after here men kylled hym in his owyn place. A mannes deth is litill set by now a days. Þerfore be ware of symulacion, for thei wull speke right fayr to you þat wuld ye ferd right euyll...Lete this letter be brent whan ye haue vnderstond it.

(1: 360-1)

Fears of dissimulation and assassination attempts evidently coloured Margaret's perception of contemporary instability. Yet her observations about the fickleness of men's promises and the prevalence of rumour reinforce the linguistic climate in which she wrote, prompting her command that the 'letter be brent whan ye haue vnderstond it'.[43] Margaret clearly felt impelled to make the command because of her suspicions about the Duke of Suffolk's involvement in the pursuit of Fastolf's lands and the danger it posed for her sons' lives. As Watt observes, the survival of the letter shows that Margaret's warnings were not heeded, but this is not in itself evidence that its contents went unheeded.[44] For Margaret, the tenants on Fastolf's lands, and those people who reported these rumours to her, the warnings she issued were significant and provide a very different perspective upon the choices that were made when deciding what information to privilege in a letter.

[43] Other contemporary letter writers developed ingenious methods to prevent their letters falling into the wrong hands. According to Hanham, when Sir John Cely and George Cely wrote about controversial events they frequently replaced key words with ciphers, masking their involvement and opinions with code; *Celys and their World*, p. 12. Harvey also notes that in 1452 some Kentish rebels proposed to write letters in invisible ink to the Duke of York or the Earl of Devon (NA KB9/955 m.2); *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 167. Besnier notes that fears about the contents of letters being overheard remain current in the reading and writing practices of Polynesian islanders, and also manifests in the commands for letters to be burnt upon receipt; *Literacy, Emotion and Authority*, p. 82.
[44] Watt, 'No Writing', p. 123.

Despite the opportunities offered by literacy and the status it afforded, an apprehension of the power of the written word is overt in much of the Pastons' correspondence. Reports based upon hearsay and oral communication could be passed off as misheard information, but not all written accounts were so easily dispelled. One of the most disturbing implications of the attempt to source information was not what information might be uncovered, but what it could be used for. On 8 April 1454, Thomas Denys wrote from the Fleet prison to John Paston I to report that

> Myn hevines is sum-what incresid for a fals harlot, sauf your reuerens, one James Cook, a seruant of myn, falsly and traitorously is hired bi Watte Ingham and hath accused and diffamed me and my wif of setting vp billes again lordis, that, Almighti God I take to record, I not am ne neuer was gilty therof. But the same theef and Asshcote han made an appoyntement to come and robb me of suych little goodis of myn as thei can gete in Norffolk or Norwich...The said Asshcote can counterfete my hand, and therfore I drede he wole stele by sum fals letters suych as he might gete. (2: 88-9)

The ability to imitate someone's handwriting and to produce documents in their name provided the means to both discredit and defraud them. In such a volatile political environment, such counterfeiting could be used to dangerous effect, as the forgeries of James Cook and Ashcote illustrate. Subversive practices like these reinforce how the destabilising effects of national politics impacted upon the maintenance of basic standards of law and order. The fact that the contents of letters could be distorted, projected back upon their writer, or even completely fabricated, highlights how an increase in literacy made letter-writing a political medium. As the concept of letter-writing was transformed, it was inevitable that it became associated with the contentions surrounding the changing status of the vernacular.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has identified how the domestic, local, and national contexts in which the Pastons wrote their letters influenced their writing practices and the languages that they used. Although particular environments and situations generated set vocabularies and formulae, each letter exceeds these conventions in being to some extent multivocal. Letters not only represent a dialogue between correspondents but are also interfaces for transitions between speech and writing, and the merging of

different registers, vocabularies and discourses. The political situation of the mid-fifteenth century also exerted a strong influence upon the Pastons' linguistic choices. Although the Pastons' outlook was conditioned by the ongoing struggle for power in Norfolk, the increasing intrusion of national politics as a result of the breakdown of the government altered the dynamics of power. As a result, the letters display an increasing need to produce and deploy new vocabularies to define deviance and represent current affairs. Not only do these vocabularies evince how the Pastons had to adapt to political circumstances, but they also indicate their need to counter the linguistic strategies of other social groups. As existing vocabularies were stretched by the disturbed conditions that they were used in, alternative meanings developed that blurred the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable language.

Despite representing the interests of a gentry family, the language used in the Paston letters is indicative of how the changing status of the vernacular impacted across society. By illustrating how a particular social group manipulated language in the assertion of their identity, the letters provide a case study of how the tensions raised by language change were mediated. The different approaches to opprobrious language among the Paston correspondents, and the problems they faced in identifying it, are suggestive of how different social groups used the political status of deviant expression to forge and assert identities. In addition, by exemplifying the various processes by which news was gathered and the complex networks that conveyed it, the letters can be positioned within an extensive web of communication. Letters not only disseminated news but could also generate it, fuelling new reports and encouraging the exchange of information. Yet although the increase in personal letter-writing in the fifteenth century was a product of growing literacy, the politics surrounding the spread of news did not derive from this development alone. Oral report remained coexistent with the written as anxieties about the misplacement of letters and misunderstanding of their contents prevailed. Yet the fact that oral accounts could both complement and contradict written messages also amplified the uncertainties of the period and opened up the potential for political exploitation. In capturing the interchange between the oral and the written, the Paston letters negotiate a complex linguistic divide and the unique issues that it raised for meaning and representation. Chapter five considers the implications of this situation in more detail

by examining the intersection of competing political vocabularies in the *Coventry Leet Book*.

Chapter 5

Opprobrious Language and the Definition of Misconduct in the *Coventry Leet Book*

Chapter five examines the political implications of vernacular development as they manifest in the vocabularies used to classify linguistic deviance and misconduct in the *Coventry Leet Book.* Although the terms used were largely derived from traditional legal terminology, their application in the context of fifteenth-century Coventry illustrates how perceptions of transgression and the principles behind its description were changing. Coventry's leet court was the city's central legal institution. The *Leet Book*, or Mayor's register, is a fair copy of all of the court's records, including accounts of popular disturbances, ordinances passed, trade regulations, and correspondence with the Crown. This combination of accounts documents the fluctuating dynamics of power in the city between citizens, the ruling oligarchy, and the Crown. As local and national politics became increasingly intertwined in the second half of the fifteenth century, conflict between these overlapping spheres of authority raised particular anxieties about deviance and non-conformity.

Coventry provides an especially acute example of these tensions. The instability occasioned by the breakdown of national politics and descent into civil war impacted heavily upon the city. Its geographic location and relative economic stability until the middle of the fifteenth century made Coventry a powerful political base, firstly as a Lancastrian stronghold, and later as a Yorkist acquisition. Although never incurring royal displeasure for long, Coventry's allegiances always appear to have been regarded apprehensively. Between 1460 and 1500, the *Leet Book* records the correspondence and proclamations of four different monarchs, meaning that the court's business was increasingly conducted in relation to royal injunction and intervention. In addition, the city suffered from increasingly unstable internal politics as a result of a series of long-running disputes about the common lands instigated by citizens, the city's religious authorities, and even members of the ruling oligarchy. Coventry's officials were thus engaged in a series of intricate political manoeuvrings that provoked continued negotiation between internal and external demands. The records compiled in the *Leet Book* both reflect and participate in these conflicts through the vocabularies that they employ and adopt. As such, each record is more

than just a basic legal account; they can be regarded as interfaces, where the definition of deviance is mediated at local and national levels according to changing linguistic priorities and techniques.

The impact of changing social, economic and political circumstances upon the language used to define and represent deviance has been the subject of a number of important historical studies. In her analysis of attitudes towards crime and social regulation in medieval towns, Barbara Hanawalt has observed that the social changes of the mid-fourteenth century became increasingly visible in common language. For instance, with the implementation of the Statute of Labourers in 1349, terms such as 'good repute' came to be associated with certain social groups, endorsing their new social mobility. Furthermore, judgment of what constituted the standards and behaviour characteristic of 'ill repute' were influenced by the spread of literacy, especially as libellous songs and bill-casting became more prevalent.[1] Likewise, Marjorie McIntosh's studies of England's local leet courts identify a growing concern with social harmony. By the second half of the fifteenth century the majority of cases heard had shifted from crimes that threatened social peace to ones which involved infringements of governance.[2] The anxieties surrounding this shift particularly manifested in a discrepancy between the vocabularies used to describe misdemeanour and the altered social context in which these offences occurred, forcing jurors to seek alternative vocabularies.[3]

In support of these arguments, a number of studies have identified the changing meanings of particular words and the generation of new vocabularies in the fifteenth century. These studies provide valuable precedents and methods for examining the terms used to define misconduct in the *Coventry Leet Book*. I. M. W. Harvey has noted that the term 'Lollard' was not only used to identify religious dissidents but generally indicated any idler or vagabond, and by the middle of the

[1] Barbara A. Hanawalt, ''Of Good and Ill Repute': The Limits of Community Tolerance', in Hanawalt, *'Of Good and Ill Repute': Gender and Social Control in Medieval England*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 12-13.
[2] See Marjorie K. McIntosh, 'Finding Language for Misconduct: Jurors in Fifteenth-Century Local Courts', in *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 87-8.
[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 95-113, and see also Marjorie K. McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior in England, 1370-1600*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

century had been enlarged further to cover priest-haters and general troublemakers.[4] Likewise, McIntosh has observed that the remit of the term 'vagabond' was enlarged in response to changing perceptions of disorder.[5] Terms such as 'riot' and 'conventicle' were also extended and refashioned in response to changing circumstances.[6] Changes and expansions of meaning like these indicate something of the elastic nature of traditional legal terminology. As such, it is important to acknowledge with Paul Strohm that social change does not only occur prior to and independently of language. As with other studies which have highlighted the significance of reconstructing vocabularies,[7] Strohm's examination of the formation of a new discourse of statecraft in the fifteenth century stresses the importance of considering language's 'active importance as a crucible of new perceptions and actions'.[8] It is the capacity of language to initiate dialogues as well as respond to existing conversations that makes it such a valuable register of the effects of social and political change.

The tensions arising from vernacular development must also be considered as exerting a strong influence upon these linguistic transitions. As part of the rise and consolidation of Chancery English in the fifteenth century, these vernacular legal vocabularies were legitimised by successive governments.[9] However, due to the politics of language change and the social and political context of the period, their authorisation was no longer straightforward. The translation of traditional Latin and

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[4] I. M. W. Harvey, *Jack Cade's Revolt*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 25.

[5] McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior*, pp. 88-93.

[6] On the evolution of these terms, see, respectively: John G. Bellamy, *Criminal Law and Society in Late Medieval and Tudor England*, (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984), pp. 54-89; Penn Szittya, 'Lollard Conventicles and the Discourse of Power', unpublished conference paper read at the International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds, July 2003.

[7] In addition to those studies indicated, important work on vocabularies and the evolution of particular words include: Margaret Aston's study of the word 'sect' in the (self-)fashioning of Lollardy in 'Were the Lollards a Sect?', in *The Medieval Church: Universities, Heresy, and the Religious Life. Essays in Honour of Gordon Leff*, ed. Peter Biller and Barry Dobson, (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1999), pp. 163-92; Anne Hudson's preliminary reconstruction of Lollard discourse in 'A Lollard Sect Vocabulary?', in her *Lollards and their Books*, (London and Ronceverte: Hambledon Press, 1985), pp. 165-80; and Christopher Cannon's detailed account of Chaucer's language in *The Making of Chaucer's English: A Study of Words*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[8] Paul Strohm, *Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 6.

[9] On the development of Chancery English, see John H. Fisher, *The Emergence of Standard English*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), and Malcolm Richardson, 'Henry V, the English Chancery, and Chancery English', *Speculum* 55 (1980), 726-50. As Fiona Somerset observes, the endorsement of this official language took place in conjunction with the de-legitimisation of others; *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 10.

French terms into English caused them to enter a common linguistic domain where they were forced to compete with other vernacular discourses being used to assert and contest power. As Andrew Butcher has observed, 'English has its own social, moral, and political identity, and indeed is not singular but multiple in itself, a matter of choosing between Englishes'.[10] From the 1420s onwards, the majority of the *Coventry Leet Book*'s records were recorded in English.[11] This decision means that the multiple vernaculars of the different accounts not only co-exist, but also provide evidence of the interchange of vocabularies between accounts. Linguistic transfers of this nature reveal how the civic identity projected by the *Leet Book* was underpinned by continual cultural negotiations.[12]

Yet despite its rich potential to be studied upon a number of levels, the *Coventry Leet Book* has received very little critical attention. Charles Phythian-Adams's seminal study of Coventry's economic fortunes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries overlooks the *Leet Book* as a source. Although it is clear that Coventry did experience a debilitating decline in its economic prosperity within this period, Phythian-Adams's attempt to explain this through 'a multi-dimensional approach to social structure' falls short of being a thorough 'anatomy of a city'.[13] Analysis of the *Leet Book*'s composition and the records it contains permits a more thorough analysis of Coventry's social and political position in the fifteenth century besides its economic position. In illustrating the increasing tensions between the city's ruling oligarchy and its citizens and the Crown, the *Leet Book* also provides an alternative explanation for why a decline in civic values occurred as part of Coventry's sixteenth-century 'desolation'. Moreover, as Caroline Barron has argued, concentrating upon the experiences and fortunes of individual towns exemplifies and extends the general

[10] A. F. Butcher, 'The Functions of Script in the Speech Community of a Late Medieval Town, c.1300-1550', in *The Uses of Script and Print, 1300-1700*, ed. Julia Crick and Alexandra Walsham, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 169.

[11] The *Leet Book* differs from other urban books in this respect; for instance, Bristol's *Little Red Book*, continued to be recorded in a mixture of Latin, French and English throughout the fifteenth century. See *The Little Red Book of Bristol*, 2 vols., ed. F. B. Bickley, (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, 1900). For a linguistic analysis of changing letter-writing practices and their development in urban and domestic correspondence in the period 1400-1600, see Sarah R. Williams, 'English Vernacular Letters, c.1400-c.1600: Language, Literacy and Culture', unpublished PhD thesis, Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York, 2001.

[12] On the production of urban records and their linguistic structuring in the late medieval period, see Butcher, 'Functions of Script', pp. 165-9. The number of city bureaucrats who compiled their own civic books in this period might also be considered as contributing to this situation.

[13] Charles V. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 1, 71-184.

trends identified in more wide-ranging social and political studies.[14] The *Leet Book* can thus be regarded as being both specific to Coventry and representative of the political struggles taking place in other English towns as linguistic and national politics combined.

It is the premise of this chapter that urban records like the *Coventry Leet Book* not only describe deviant language and behaviour, but actively work to maintain these definitions by modifying and manipulating language and its effects. The attempts of different parties to re-signify language and impose meaning, and the implications of these actions, are the subjects that are addressed here. The first and second sections examine the nature of the terms used to define deviant behaviour and language. They explore how the meanings of some of these terms were being adapted to suit changing social and political conditions, and how national political concerns increasingly intruded into existing urban vocabularies. The third and fourth sections then explore how the application of these vocabularies was influenced by the political conditions of the second half of the fifteenth century. Issues of allegiance and control at national and local levels are juxtaposed to show how the language used to represent these circumstances was shaped and determined by them.

5.1 Defining misconduct

In the second half of the fifteenth century, various terms relating to deviant practices were used extensively in both the records produced by Coventry's city officials and the correspondence that they received from the Crown. By considering how these vocabularies were developed and applied, it is possible to suggest the motivations that led to their increasing use. The terms used fall into a series of vocabularies that designate deviant actions, groups and individuals. These vocabularies represent the different stages by which deviance occurred and took form. Terms for disruption identify various kinds of general discontent which, if left unchecked, gave rise to more focused outbreaks of group resistance. Specifying the

[14] Barron's study of the political culture of late medieval London seeks in particular to extend the ideas presented by John Watts in his *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Caroline M. Barron, 'The Political Culture of Medieval London', in *The Fifteenth Century IV: Political Culture in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. Linda Clark and Christine Carpenter, (Oxford: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), pp. 111-13.

intentions behind the banding together of dissidents enabled the authorities to identify and categorise particular deviant activities. Table 1 lists these terms according to the ways that they were applied in the *Coventry Leet Book*:

Table 1: Terms for describing deviance in the *Coventry Leet Book*

Deviance as disruption	Deviance as group action	Deviant intentions
Accusations	Assembly	Aduersarie
Affrays	Confederacy	Contraryours
Commotions	Congregation	Disobeyers/ disobeissantes
Debates	Conspiracies	Enemies
Disobedience	Conventicle	Idell persones
Dissensions	Insurrection	Indisposed persones
Disturbance	Rebellions	Lewde pepull
Idleness	Riot	Misruled folkes
Imaginations	Rising	Mysdoers
Injuries		Offendours
Misgovernances		Persones vndisposed
Misrules		Rebelles
Mocions		Riottours
Murmur		Suspect persones
Noise		Sympull persones
Offences		Theves
Quarrel		Traitours
Rumour		Trespassours
Sclaunders		Vagabundes
Stirrings		
Stryves		
Trespasses		
Trouble		
Variance		

The ability to classify offences offered the authorities the means to identify and demarcate offenders so that they could be brought back under official control. In order to effectively counteract the disruption caused by their actions, these terms were reliant upon the accuracy of their application. For instance, the terms used to categorise disruption often aim to reflect the dissenting attitudes of their participants, but are less oppositional than terms which identify specific deviant intentions. It is a distinction that separates those who express dissatisfaction with a regime from those who make efforts to challenge it by uniting with others who hold the same beliefs.

As such, the terms which comprised these vocabularies not only represented particular types of offence but also permitted the authorities to distinguish offences

according to their seriousness and the purpose of their participants. In a dispute between the city and the Prior of Grey Friars in 1469 over the allocation of common lands, the common people who resorted to hedge-breaking upon the contested lands were classed as 'sympull peple' rather than rioters (350). Because their actions probably arose as a result of the ongoing boundary disputes, these individuals were absolved of their responsibility. The meaning of 'simple' as naïve is repeated in the case of John Bawdewyn, a cordwainer from Dartmouth. In 1469 he was committed to ward for having delivered a treasonable letter, but it was later discovered that he was 'not knowing to the contenue of the sayd lettre, but of innocence & simplenesse delíueryd it' (340). The absolution of these individuals is represented according to a very different linguistic construction from those who are found to be at fault. Often the terms used to identify deviance are arranged in clusters to emphasise their heinousness. It is also common for the terms to be layered with adjectives that focus and amplify their meaning, producing a strong moral and emotive effect.

The precedent for these presentations was widespread in moral discourse. Given that deviant actions were regarded as arising from sinful impulses, it is inappropriate to consider the terminology used to classify deviance as being confined to legal discourse. In its lengthy account of the kinds of behaviour that will result in excommunication, the author of the sermon cycle, *Jacob's Well*, identifies 'alle comoun baratourys, felouns, & here mayntenourys, conspyratourys, [and] confederatourys', along with anyone 'þat...purposin, comettyn, castyn, or ymagyn deth, or dysseyȝt, or ony oþer wrong, to þe kyng or qween, or to here chyldere, to lettyn here lawe or ryght'.[15] 'Ymagyn' and 'dysseyȝt' are prominent terms in this presentation, and were commonly employed across discourses used to identify deviance. They occur regularly in Coventry's guild regulations, for example being used in 1435 when Coventry's ironworking industries were criticised for producing poor quality goods. Their careless workmanship is reported with considerable emphasis upon their dissemblance: the defective products are 'dissayveably wrought', 'foule' and liable to 'harme' all their users. The mayor judged that such practices were 'grevous & Nuyefull to the comen pepull', and subsequently all ironworkers were commanded to work

[15] *Jacob's Well*, ed. Arthur Brandeis, EETS o.s. 115, (1900), pp. 14-5.

> with-outen Gyle or disseyte…with-outon any disseyte or Colour of disseyte…ne selle be Colour ne sotell Imagynacion ne Cardwyre ne mystermannes wyre, the whiche may be hynderyng or grevyng to the kynges lege pepull.[16]

Both ‘colour’ and ‘imagination’ indicate the intention to deceive, stressing the concealed and hence treacherous nature of such actions. Moreover, in focusing upon the capacity of individuals to conceive such deception, these accounts are concerned to identify the deviant disposition of miscreants. This faculty is particularly emphasised when these terms are applied in political contexts.[17] As part of Edward IV’s response to William Huet’s insolence in 1464, Coventry’s officials were charged to punish ‘any personnes of like indisposicion’ if they ‘vexe thair neighbours, oure subgittes…by any such Imaginacions, sclaundours, or feyned accusacions, herafter or make any Routes or conuenticles’ (331). Not only do deviant individuals resist their subordinate position, but in disseminating their discontent they are also liable to propagate widespread dissent. In their use of the same vocabularies, all of these presentations assert a common apprehension about the potential for deviance to disrupt communal harmony and undermine established order.

To counteract these subversive influences, the language used to describe deviance not only aims to replicate the nature of the transgression described, but in doing so, to counteract its insidious influence by revealing it. In 1489, Henry VII issued a command to all of England’s towns regarding the ‘theves, riottours, vacabundes and suspect persones’ who haunted the towns at night committing ‘enormilies and misbehaving’. It is stressed repeatedly that, as a result of their being ‘schortely ffauored, loged and succoured’, these individuals cause ‘gret anoiante, hurt, damage and inquietacion of our subgietes’ (538). By using emotive language, the letter aims to impress how the failure to address the problem would lead to the proliferation of these malefactors, and potentially, the collapse of all good order. Concerns about vagrancy were raised by the Statute of Labourers and affirmed by the

[16] *The Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Mary Dormer Harris, 4 vols., EETS o.s. 134 (1907-8), pp. 181-3. All subsequent references from the *Leet Book* refer to Harris’ss edition.

[17] On the use of the terms ‘coloured’ and ‘imagination’ as part of Lancastrian political discourse, see Strohm, *Politique*, p. 30.

legislation passed against vagabonds in 1383 following the Peasants' Revolt.[18] By refusing to work, the indolent and itinerant lifestyle of vagabonds aroused suspicions that they fostered dissidence. In a letter from Prince Edward in 1481, it was specifically commanded that 'all vacabundes & Idell persones...refusing to goo to occupacion, be compelled to fynd sufficient suerte of theire good aberyng' (495). This injunction was issued following the riot that had taken place over the allocation of the common lands in the same year, making a clear association between inactivity and the performance of 'Riotes & offences' (495). In order to identify and overcome these 'misruled persones', Henry VII's correspondence of 1489 advised that they be sought 'in as priue & secret wyse as ye shall mowe best diuise' (538). It is notable that the language used mimics the clandestine existence and behaviour of these individuals. In appreciation of their sinister influence, vagabonds are to be thoroughly rooted out of the city in a process of exposure and eradication.

Individual malefactors were typically treated as presumptuous social agitators, a belief that is reflected in the humiliating public punishments that they often received.[19] By distinguishing them from the rest of the community, it was intended that their disruptive power would be undermined. However, when these individuals banded together they became a much more significant problem. In the urban environment, the threat posed by such misconduct is clearly represented as an usurpation of power and authority. Following the bakers strike in Coventry in 1484, the *Leet Book* records how

> the Bakers of the seid Citie in gret nombre riottesly disposed assembled theym & vnlawefully confedered, intending of hight wille þe reproche of þe seid Maire, sodenly departed oute of the seid Cite vnto Bakynton, levyng þe seid Cite destitute of bred...And for a suerte that þe said Bakers shall not eftesones offende, they be their free willes indented with þe seid Maire, & þe oþer parties amonges theym-self, that they neuer fro-hensfurth whils they inhabite within the seid Cite, & vse þe craft of baking, woll make eny such vnlawefull assemble,

[18] McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior*, pp. 80, 88-93, 129. According to Barbara Hanawalt in her *Crime and Conflict in English Communities, 1300-1348*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 26, the term 'vagabond' was initially used in the early fourteenth century to denote a person who had fled from a crime.

[19] For details of the kinds of public punishments imposed in the urban environment, see Barbara A. Hanawalt, 'Rituals of Inclusion and Exclusion: Hierarchy and Marginalization in Medieval London', in *Good and Ill Repute*, pp. 18-34.

> riotte, confederacye, nor departer oute of the seid Cite to þe grife or reproch of eny Maire. (519)

The primary function of the report is to invalidate the bakers' illegitimate action in assembling and confederating together. Rather than account for the causes of the bakers' strike, it is their disruptive intentions that are the focus, being 'riottesly disposed...[and] intendyng of hight will þe reproche of þe said Maire'. Any uprising against authority was regarded as a deviation from accepted channels of complaint, and in order to reassert authority and mitigate official responsibility, the consequences of discontent are privileged over their cause. By treating the insurgents collectively as an 'vnlawefull assemble, riotte, [and] confederacye', control is regained over this 'gret nombre' of restive bakers. At the same time, the emphasis placed upon their 'noysyng...villany & reproche' marginalises the bakers as a faction which would seek to undermine the authority of the mayor and the order of the city through their resistance. Moreover, by stressing the alienation of the bakers from conventional rule, illustrated here by their departure from the city, the credibility of their actions is downplayed.

Conflict between Coventry's ruling oligarchy and the trade guilds was always likely, especially if a particular guild came to dominate power.[20] However, the vocabularies used to classify deviance were not only developed to reflect local tensions. Christian Zacher has argued that fears that nonconformists might band together increased in the late fourteenth century in relation to the growth of *curiositas*.[21] Idle language was particularly regarded as a symptom of such inquistiveness, and its equation with disorder reflects the attention paid to idlers and vagabonds. As the fifteenth century progressed, the application of the vocabularies used to describe deviant activities altered. During a visit to Coventry in 1451, Henry VI commanded that the authorities 'suffer no Ryottes, Conuenticuls ne congregasions of lewde pepull among you' (265). Standard formulae like these were often used by

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[20] On the power struggles surrounding guild ceremonies, see Benjamin R. McRee, 'Unity or Division? The Social Meaning of Guild Ceremony in Urban Communities', in *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Katherine L. Reyerson, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 189-207, and for urban politics more generally, Susan Reynolds, 'Medieval Urban History and the History of Political Thought', *Urban History Yearbook* 7 (1982), 14-23. On the position of artisans in late medieval towns, see Heather Swanson, *Medieval Artisans: An Urban Class in Late Medieval England*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

[21] Christian K. Zacher, *Curiosity and Pilgrimage: The Literature of Discovery in Fourteenth-Century England*, (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), esp. p. 54.

the monarchy to maintain order and prevent misconduct rather than to respond to or specify actual offences. However, the frequency of these terms' use increased from the 1460s, showing that fears about the degree and consequences of popular transgression had become a much more pressing issue. Quelling discontent before it could reach more dangerous levels had become a priority, resulting in the need for a comprehensive vocabulary to define deviance.

Evidence that these vocabularies were being used to fulfil different functions can be witnessed in the way that particular terms were expanded in the fifteenth century to include new meanings. Many of these terms originated in Latin and French legal vocabularies developed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and were simply carried over into English. However, the continued use of these terms should not obscure the fact that they developed alternative or stronger meanings in relation to social and political changes. Likewise, their adaptation does not mean that alternative or earlier meanings were necessarily superseded, but that they either gained additional connotations or the frequency of a particular meaning increased. The *MED* shows that a number of the terms used to categorise disruption and group actions were altered in this way, especially those which were initially used in religious discourses.[22] For instance, the meaning of 'conspiracies' as an unlawful plot remained constant, but developed beyond religious precedents to be applied in political discourse. Likewise, 'commotion' was often used in late fourteenth century texts to represent an emotional disturbance, but in the fifteenth century was used more frequently as a term to denote public unrest.

Other words exhibit an intensification of particular connotations. The meaning of 'affray' as a riot appears to have predominated over its other meanings as an

[22] As Christopher Cannon has observed in his *Chaucer's English*, pp. 42-3, use of the *MED* for the purpose of establishing the first instance of a word's use is problematic, citing Tim William Machan's arguments in his *Techniques of Translation: Chaucer's* Boece, (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1985), p. 50, that much of the original written resources that would provide this evidence have now been lost. A further question can also be raised about the range of literature covered by the *MED*; although employing some administrative documents and functional writings, the emphasis is upon literary texts and printed works. However, as Cannon points out, the partiality of all written evidence means that we cannot regard the language used in them as a straightforward record anyway. In being textual records, they represent written languages which do not necessarily correlate with spoken language. As such, the evidence provided by the *MED* in relation to these legal vocabularies upholds the argument that, in those texts where it is employed, there exists an attempt to develop a specific political discourse within an official, largely literate network.

assault or form of outcry; 'rising' was more commonly used to indicate a rebellion rather than a term for motion; the element of organisation in forming a 'congregation' was stressed over a general meeting or gathering; and 'conventicle', a term often specifically applied to Lollard groups, was extended to cover any illicit meeting. Two new terms can also be identified as having been introduced in the fifteenth century: 'misrules' which was used to indicate misconduct and riotous behaviour, and 'insurrection', which denoted an uprising against a ruler, or an armed assault or attack. The increasing use or tailoring of these words to confront disorder highlights how legal vocabularies had to be modified to retain their applicability. Examining the terms used to classify deviance according to their use gives the impression that misconduct was easily suppressible. Yet the changing meanings of these terms indicate a far from stable situation. Despite their authoritative status and widespread use, the adaptation of legal vocabularies to meet the demands of fifteenth century disorder stretched their ability to promote order and reinstate control.

5.2 Defining opprobrious language

One of the causes responsible for the changing emphases of these vocabularies was the increasing intrusion of the Crown into urban affairs in the fifteenth century. Hanawalt's description of the legal system in the early fourteenth century sees local communities as possessing their own scale of infringements, while the realm possessed a more general outlook.[23] Towns which had been granted freedom from the Crown were governed autonomously, with much of their legal system governed by local customs. They could, however, request royal intervention in legal disputes that extended beyond local jurisdiction or were particularly problematic. Likewise, the Crown issued commands to the towns to address particular issues of law and order. These exchanges between Crown and city were one of the ways by which solidarity was maintained between the authorities. In particular, the deployment of certain vocabularies and formulae encouraged an interchange of language and ideas that reflected changes in the relationship between these two parties. As rising levels of disorder began to become a matter of national significance, attention was especially paid to the suppression of opprobrious language. Through a succession of

[23]Hanawalt, *Crime and* Conflict, p. 11.

governmental legislation and royal correspondence, perceptions of linguistic deviance in the urban environment were increasingly inflected by the decrees of the Crown.

Concerns about the disruptive effects of opprobrious language were commonly expressed in the legal records of medieval towns. Opprobrious comments were traditionally judged in relation to the status of the speaker and the context in which they were spoken. Prominent secular courts such as Coventry's leet court prosecuted abusive or insidious words spoken against members of the ruling oligarchy which were liable to undermine civic authority and incite unrest. Legislation against opprobrious language was therefore concerned as much to preserve the social hierarchy as it was to maintain order. However, the repeated royal injunctions against the use of opprobrious language also indicate that linguistic crimes were becoming a national concern. Fears about the potential for widespread dissidence transformed the perceived impact and effect of such language and influenced the vocabularies used to describe it. Table 2 lists the terms used to classify opprobrious language in the fifteenth-century records of the *Coventry Leet Book*:

Table 2: Terms for opprobrious language in the *Coventry Leet Book*

Terms	Infringement(s) applied to
Disclaunderowes langage	Rumour-mongering
Froward langage	Riot
Inordinate langage	Disobedience
Ouerthwart wordes	Resistance
Schort langage	Resistance
Seducious langage/ wordes	Disobedience/ defamation/ political allegiance
Suspecious langage	Political allegiance
Vnfittyng langage	Political allegiance/ riot/ disobedience
Vntowardly langage	Disobedience

Aside from the single instance of 'ouethwart wordes', which is used in the description of the rumours surrounding a suspected Lollard preacher in 1424, all of the terms for opprobrious language occur after 1460.[24] This concentration reveals how attention to certain types of opprobrious language increased in relation to the turbulent national politics of the second half of the fifteenth century. Yet although these terms appear in equal numbers in accounts written by the city and letters sent by the Crown

[24] On Coventry's Lollard groups, see Shannon McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities, 1420-1530*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 22-46.

and were derived from a common vocabulary, their application differed slightly depending upon their local or national source. The terms used by Coventry's officials tend to reflect breaches of authority and are inward-looking, whereas the terms used by the Crown are focused upon the subversive implications of language, especially as they relate to the promotion of factional interests.

Rather than just being applied according to different criteria, each of the terms indicates a different type of language or aspect of linguistic misconduct which forms part of a scale of offence. Therefore, although some of the terms have similar meanings, they are not synonymous. The term 'vnfittyng langage' is used in four accounts, and also appears in a letter from the Queen in 1474, where it is used in the form of 'vnfittyng demeaning' (407), signifying inappropriate behaviour. By noting a suspect's 'demeaning' or 'disposition', deviance at the level of disruption could cover both the intention to offend as well as an actual offence. When used in isolation, the term functions as a general indicator of improper conduct; however, if used in combination, its meaning could be amplified or used to reinforce other aspects of a particular misdemeanour. For instance, in the account of the riot that broke out over the allocation of the common lands in 1481, John Tyler was reported as having abused the city's Recorder with 'froward & vnfittyng langage' (491). 'Froward' is also used in the same report to indicate the 'evell-disposed' nature of the rioters, who in their 'frowardnesse' broke down hedges and dikes. Like the general connotations of 'vnfittyng', 'froward' could denote any kind of refractory behaviour. Yet by combining these terms the account indicates how Tyler's language was not only unacceptable but also impertinent. By defying the Recorder's commands to return to his work, Tyler and his fellow rioters were resisting their subservient position and potentially posed a threat to communal solidarity.

That such insolent language might generate insubordinate ideas is proposed by some alternative applications of the term 'vnfittyng'. The term is used repeatedly in a series of letters between the city and Edward IV in 1464 regarding the refusal of William Huet to be governed by the leet court's ruling regarding his dispute with William Bedon. Despite having had his case referred to the Crown, Huet

> wold not obey, but vtterly refusyd, and had then right vnfittyng, inordinate & ceducious langage sowynyng to the derogacion of the kynges lawes & of his peace yn right evyll example. (330)

The official account recorded in the *Leet Book* is clearly structured to influence the king's judgment of Huet's refractoriness. Not only is he deemed to have made inappropriate and immoderate comments, but the addition of 'ceducious' transforms the implications of his resistance. By impressing that such language was made 'to the derogacion of the kynges lawes & of his peace yn right evyll example', Coventry's officials were applying a standard rhetorical formula used to identify dissident individuals. Not only does Huet refuse to be governed, but his words are also regarded as an indication of his dismissal of the king's authority. The possibility that Huet might be considered a role model by other citizens of Coventry is highlighted because it proposes the frightening possibility that he might inspire an uprising against the king. These fears are directly acknowledged in the king's response, where the phrases used by the city officials are repeated almost verbatim as they are urged to punish Huet and any other offenders that might seek to follow his example (330-1).

Seditious speech was not part of the traditional legal vocabulary used in late medieval towns but was introduced by the Crown. It is roughly equivalent to the use of the term 'opprobrious' in fourteenth-century urban records, where it signifies highly contemptuous language.[25] Indeed, the term 'seducious' is not only linked to ideas of deceitful intent and subversive activity, but in the *MED* is also listed as being specifically applied to language that is 'sharp' or 'bitter' in nature, mimicking the effect of opprobrious outbursts but with national implications. 'Seducious langage' is the most powerful designation of linguistic affront in the *Leet Book* records and recurs frequently in relation to Coventry's questionable political allegiances. Injunctions against the use of seditious language were made in 1477, and in 1489 after Richard and Johanne Reynold were indicted for voicing 'disclaunderous langage' at court about the defection of Coventry's officials and citizens. In this latter instance, the rumours were intended to raise suspicions about the city's support at a time when Henry VII was beset by pretenders to the throne. Likewise, Edward IV's

[25] The term 'opprobrious language' is used in the fourteenth-century Latin records of the *Plea and Memoranda Rolls* of London's Guildhall; *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls, 1364-81*, ed. A. H. Thomas, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924-1959), pp. 3, 17, 46, 125, 149, 224.

communication in 1477 also emphasises the disruptive potential of language, having been issued shortly after the Duke of Clarence had been sent to the Tower for conspiring against the king and Thomas Burdet had been executed for treason. It enjoins the Mayor to seek out 'eny suspect persone...hauyng suspicious langage' who might still be pledged to the Duke of Clarence or Earl of Warwick, and to punish anyone 'which myght sowe eny sysme betwixt the kynges goode grace and eny his lordez or þe cominalte of þis roialme' (420-1).

Although continually addressing Coventry's officials as allies, royal communications like these forced the city to question its political allegiances and whether they might constitute misconduct. Writing shortly before his deposition in February 1460, Henry VI anxiously questioned Coventry's officials about the city's support:

> credible reporte is made vn-to vs howe diuers of thinhabitantes of oure Cite of Couentre haue, sithe the tyme of oure departing from thens, vsed & had right vnfittyng langage ayenst oure estate and personne and in fauouring our supersticious traitours and rebelles nowe late in oure parlement there attaincted, wherby grete commocions & murmur ben like to folowe to the grete disturbaunce of oure feithfull true subgettes onlesse that punisshement & remedie for the redresse therof the rather be had. (309)

Although following the traditional formula of calling for the preservation of law and order, the notion that the citizens' 'vnfittyng langage' might inspire 'grete commocions & murmur' indicates a dangerous situation. Rather than simply representing the resistant voices of a minority, such language is liable to empower those 'supersticious traitours and rebelles' who are the Crown's enemies and thus become self-perpetuating. Indeed, the destabilising implications of this situation were already being felt, with the king being careful to indicate that his information came from 'credible reporte' rather than those deceivers who would wish to promote his enemies. The capacity for opprobrious language to incite suspicion and unease made it a serious problem at any time, but when used to express partisan opinions it became highly alarming. Fears about what such language might achieve increasingly coloured perceptions of linguistic deviance both at local and national levels in the period. It is

thus unsurprising that the traditional scale of linguistic deviance was enlarged and emphases shifted as the disruptive potential of language increased.

5.3 Changing contexts

In order to appreciate the impact of national politics upon the language used to define deviance, a thorough understanding of the context in which these vocabularies were used is necessary. Political circumstances in the second half of the fifteenth century were exceptional; not only did order break down as national politics became polarised, but the factional struggles and depositions that took place jeopardised the ideological framework upon which law and order were founded. With the repeated collapse of central authority, the criteria used to distinguish acceptable and unacceptable behaviour became increasingly blurred. Not only did this mean that the language used to represent deviance had to become more flexible in order to remain relevant, but such malleability also permitted it to be appropriated and reworked in the pursuit of power and influence. Use of these terms thus became less a matter of achieving appropriate representation and more a means of shaping political opinion and asserting control. As the application of these terms varied and their meanings were extended, the potential for the code to be rendered impotent by the conditions that it purported to represent became ever more marked.

For the Yorkist regime, the manipulation of these vocabularies permitted them to both discredit their Lancastrian rivals and justify Edward IV's claim to the throne. Shortly following his coronation in 1461, Edward IV commanded Coventry's authorities to

> suffre noon of oure rebelles nor disobeissantes to haue entre, interesse, fauour nor supportacion with-yn oure seid Cite yn any manere wyse. letyng you wit that yf the case require we shall prouide you wit that relief with alle diligence, so that for lak þerof noon inconuenient shall falle be Goddes grace. (314)

It was followed seven days later with an appeal for the city's assistance in helping the king to consolidate his position:

> we be comyng in oure iourney for the repressyng of oure aduersarie & Rebelles and also enemyes, straungiers as ffrensshemen and scottes, which by thexcitation and stiryng of oure seid aduersarie and Rebelles ben commyng in-to this oure lande for to distroye it, we wol straytely charge you that ye make & ordeigne alle defensible men that ye canne to come and awayte vpon vs in oure seid iourney, not faillyng as oure speciall trust is on you, and tendre the welefare of vs, of you, and all this oure lande. (314-5)

Requests like these from the newly instated king appear straightforward in their intentions. The need to legitimise the usurpation is a palpable concern, acknowledged in the way that the Lancastrians are represented by the more neutral term of 'aduersarie' rather than by name. Likewise, the menace behind the reminder to the city of its duty to preserve order and obedience to the Crown is modified by considerate gestures, such as the offer to provide 'relief with alle diligence' in recognition of the 'speciall trust' placed in Coventry's compliance. Conciliatory gestures of this kind maintain the façade of a harmonious relationship between the city and crown, presenting a model of deference and respect that is not only personal, but envisaged as a programme for 'all this oure lande'. Yet what these constructions ultimately amount to are not so much transparent appeals for support as carefully crafted statements of intent. By concentrating upon the definition of its enemies, the regime masks its own insecurities and shifts the focus to its addressee. As a result, it is the city that emerges vulnerable whilst the Crown remains an exclusive overseer.

In addition to adopting the traditional vocabularies used to define deviance, long-term problems such as the disorder arising from the practice of retaining in the localities were also invoked in support of Edward's rule and his policies. In Coventry in 1456 new fines had been introduced by the mayor to curb the number of citizens who 'dailly begynnen to gete them meyntenaunce of mighty men of straunge shires' in order to profit by suing their neighbours (294). The implications of such illegal practices were even greater for the vulnerable Yorkist regime when in 1461 a proclamation was issued forbidding the indulgence of such lawless pursuits. The mayor was ordered to see that none of Coventry's inhabitants

> neyther were ne vse oure most honnorable signe, nor any other lordes or gentilles signe, tokyn or lyuere without suffisaunt knowlage yeven to you, our saide Maire…nor that non Inhabitaunt within our seide

> Citee presume from hensforth to ryde or go out of the seide Cite to seyse, take or dispoyle any mannes goodes, or put any man to fine without authorite had from vs. (319-20)

Directives like these were primarily the product of immediate circumstances, but their wording may also have been influenced by knowledge of the content of local petitions made to the Crown. That retaining and livery and maintenance were ongoing problems provided Edward IV with the means to present them as abuses propagated by the Lancastrians. In a further communication in 1472, the king elaborated upon his concerns about such corruption, highlighting the

> embraceryе, corupcion, might and maintenaunce þat hath be & daily is vsed þurgh this our lond, both by yeving of tokenys, lyuerees, signes, making of Reteigndres and oþer-wyse, we haue vnderstand the cours & order of our lawes hath be letted, and might haue noo place as it ought to haue, nor execucion of Justice be ministred, wherof grete extorcions, Robberies, mordres and other gret exorbitaunces & mischeves haue ensued vnto gret offense & displeasir of God and vnto greet hurt of vs. (373)

The escalating disorder depicted here is intended to be a realistic portrait of the anarchy surrounding Henry VI's brief return to the throne, but the exaggerated tone begs the question of how extensive these crimes really were. Such liberal hyperbole, coupled with the emotive language outlining the impact of such misdeeds upon the common good, clearly intends to shock the urban officials and impress upon them the importance of overseeing their suppression. As both instances of this rhetoric appear at the beginning of periods of Yorkist rule, these commands were clearly informed by the need to gain control. Although James Doig argues that the Lancastrians initiated the use of language concerned with legitimacy and obedience in their proclamations, under the Yorkist regime this was reinvented as a propagandist commentary upon the state of the realm.[26]

It was quickly recognised that contrasting the lawlessness experienced under Lancastrian rule with the stability proposed by Edward IV was the most profitable means by which the new king could garner support. To draw a sharper division

[26] James A. Doig, 'Political Propaganda and Royal Proclamations in Late Medieval England', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 71 (1998), pp. 265-6.

between the old and new regimes, the king's letter regarding livery and maintenance also makes a direct appeal to popular memory:

> Callyng to Remembraunce and consideracion the gret tempests, diuisions & troubles that in late daies haue be in this our Reaume, the gret wyldnesse & indisposicion also þat hath followed by occasion wherof…wher ther be diuers and many vagabundes, and vngoodly & ille disposed persones, entending commocion & trouble of this our lande & quiet & pees of the same, renne thurgh the same oure lande sowing sede of discord and diuision in making and telling of tithinges, fals lesing & tales to thentent abouesaid. (373-4)

Written in highly emotive language, the opening address achieves a strong impact by challenging the audience to contemplate their experience of the unprecedented disorder of these 'late daies'. The liberal hyperbole used to represent these conditions is clearly formulated to induce favour, restructuring personal experience in a subtle act of persuasion. Particularly effective in this presentation is the depiction of the deviant individuals who are purportedly overrunning the land. Not only are they disposed to disturb all good order, but their seditious speech is envisaged as a kind of plague being spread everywhere they go: 'sowing sede of discord and diuision in making and telling of tithinges, fals lesing & tales'. It is a description that replicates the invasive, insidious force of opprobrious language in order to confront the audience with the fearful consequences of such rumour-mongering. Writing again in early 1473, the king implored the authorities to resist such offenders before they 'cause gret desolacion & ruyne of our citeez & placez, & so gretly hurt owr sayd royalme' (384). In this instance, memory is represented negatively, for those 'mysdoers & disobeyers of owr lawez & þe contraryours of gode rulez…haue grete boldness to remember the misrules, insurreccions & rebellions had in tyme paste' (383-4). Who controlled the past and its interpretation was a decisive indicator of political supremacy.

Language is fundamental to the achievement of this ascendancy. By adopting the traditional legal formulae used to define deviance and overlaying them with the rhetorical effect of an emotive address, a new discourse is developed in these letters. Two letters written in 1474 illustrate the genesis of this language. Edward IV wrote to the city in December to demand a benevolence for the resumption of the war with France. He began with the now conventional statement of the realm's past

predicament, lamenting the 'troubeles and diuisions of this our Reame of England by the wich it hath be brought in-to grete desolacion and pouerte to oure grettest sorowe and heuinesse' (409). These considerations form an affective preamble to the king's justification for recommencing hostilities against 'oure auncien adversaries and enemies' (409). War is depicted as the outcome of Parliament's considerations of

> the most conuenable meanes and waies howe this Reame might be restored to his olde fame & renoune with encrese of riches and prosperite, Justice to be set vp and sur peas to be kept inwards, Idilnesse and riot auoided, entercourse of merchaundise frely to be had and vsed, the land [and] thinhabitantes therein mightly to be defende. (409)

With all of these benefits to be gained, no other scheme for England's betterment could possibly be conceived:

> whan all the waies that might be thought to serue to this purpose and be exquisitely with all diligence serched & sought, there cowth none so be-houefull, conuenient, ne so profitable meane be founde, ne taken therefore, as to sett vp a notable and a mighty werre. (409)

The intensity of the language used here is designed to dispel any doubts on behalf of the people by encouraging them to share in its exulting vision of future glory. Having received pledges of assistance from the Dukes of Burgundy and Brittany, 'as neuer the like was offred to any of our progenitours in dayes past', this 'grete werk' required only 'the conuenient assistentes of our true liege people and subgettes' (409) to be fulfilled.

Such a triumphant vision of success intends the same kind of psychological conditioning as the propaganda produced by Henry V to promote war with France. Resuming the war is a statement of Edward's intentions to conquer foreign lands and enlarge England's international profile, a scheme that his predecessor had been so infamously inadequate to undertake. Indeed, recovery of 'oure old vndoubted enheritaunces, the Duchies of Normandie and Guyen and the Corone and the Reame of ffraunce' (409) – the very acquisitions that were lost under Henry VI – is Edward's primary objective. In doing so, Edward asserts himself as simulating the aspirations of Henry V, a posturing that implies a dynastic connection based upon their shared

martial designs, and which crucially excludes the reign of Henry VI. The language employed in this missive is thus not only concerned with decorous expressions and flamboyant visions. Beyond such rhetoric, Edward's intentions are to initiate a process of reformation that goes beyond reconstructing the past to attempt its partial erasure.

According to Mary Dormer Harris, the 'curious style' of this letter is due to its being 'an English translation of Latin traditional Chancery language'.[27] It follows a previous letter sent by the Queen to Coventry's officials which Harris also notes as having been composed in '"précieuse" wording'.[28] In the letter the Queen thanks the city for having punished the rebel, Reignold Bulkley, and for the hospitality offered to the Prince of Wales and the Duke of York in their recent visit to Coventry. Rather than prescribe that Reignold Bulkley should be made an 'example' of for other malefactors, the Queen eschews such conventional vocabularies and instead urges that he be punished 'In such wise as we doubte nott other of like in-disp[o]icion shall mowe therby take a warnesse semblably to attempt herafter' (408). His crime is not detailed besides the note that he had 'newly quarreled and frayed within my lordes Citee of Couentre to the commoving and distroublyng of my lordes peas…[causing] right grete inconveniente & ieopardiet' (407). Such affected language is continued in the expression of the Queen's gratitude for the reception given to her son and kinsman: 'ffor the wich youre effectuell deuoirs in þat behalfes, besides the manyfold chiertees, hertly & feythfully disposicions by you largely shewed vnto vs…we can you right especiall thank' (407-8). The pretentious phrasing employed here shows a degree of vernacular invention, possibly being derived from Humanist models imported from the continent.[29] By taking traditional notions of deviance and merging them with other privileged codes, these Yorkist writers produced a vigorous form of self-expression.

With its illusion of familiarity and affability, this highly regulated, civil address may well have been intended to promote the Crown's conciliatory policy, as

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[27] *Coventry Leet Book*, p. 409 n.3.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 408 n.1.
[29] On the nature and development of vernacular humanism, see Daniel Wakelin, *Humanism, Reading, & English Literature, 1430-1530*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Harris suggests.[30] Yet although both of these letters are concerned to induce support, their confident tone imparts none of the insecurities of the Crown's earlier correspondence. The development of new linguistic strategies not only evinces that Edward IV was seeking to consolidate his position, but that he was also seeking innovative means by which to do so. In particular, these letters display an awareness of the impact of language and what its fashioning might achieve. That opting to communicate information in the vernacular offered the means to address a wider audience and therefore increase support had long been recognised.[31] As part of his programme to promote the war with France, Henry V had commanded that proclamations be delivered in English. Edward IV capitalised further upon this advantage by decreeing that all proclamations be written in English. Rather than simply extending the remit of technical language to the public stage, as Mark Ormrod has suggested, the adoption of English as a medium for mass communication also permitted the formation of a new language of governance.[32] Yet although a tool of the English state, the linguistic innovation conducted here was also the product of very particular political motivations, making it more multifaceted than the standardised, official production that Ormrod envisages.

Examination of the language employed in the proclamations produced by Edward IV and his successors illustrates its nuanced application. Although directed to Coventry's officials in the first instance, the proclamation issued by Edward IV in 1461 against livery and maintenance is structured with a much wider audience in mind:

> we wol and charge you straytely, openly to proclayme in oure seid Cite that alle Manere Inhabitauntes therin & the hamelettes thereof duely obeye vn-to you the seid Maire, Justices of the pees, and shirrieffes of our saide Citee, touching alle manere of good rule, ordenaunces & lawfull actes, made for the worship & welfare of our seide Citee; and that non of thaym from hensforth be so hardy to

[30] *Coventry Leet Book*, p. 408 n.1.

[31] The use of English to increase popular involvement in politics and promote nationalism is discussed by Thorlac Turville-Petre in his *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290-1340*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 9-10.

[32] W. Mark Ormrod, 'The Use of English: Language, Law, and Political Culture in Fourteenth-Century England', *Speculum* 78 (2003), p. 786. See also Alison Allan, 'Royal Propaganda and the Proclamations of Edward IV', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 59 (1986), 146-54.

> affraye or quarrel wyth-yn the same our Citee, nor any Confederacye, assemble, Insurreccion or Conuenticles make. (319)

Traditional legal terminology is deployed here in a way that is intended to impress both Coventry's officials and its citizens of the need to adhere to the proclamation's commands. The authorities are pressed to communicate the royal directives without delay in order that their enforcement of them might take immediate effect: 'we wol and charge you straytely, openly to proclayme'. Coventry's citizens would not have been intended to distinguish the different forms of deviance represented by the terms used, but to be awed by the rhetorical effect generated by their grouping. By arranging the terms as a unit, the transgressions that they represent are directly offset by the transcendent official authority that represents them. It is a binary that is both informed by, and representative of, civic ideals of unity and integration. As a result, the command for obedience and observance of the city's laws represents an attempt to reset the boundaries of official power under the guise of traditional legislation.

Achieving the correct address in these public announcements was fundamental. As Doig has observed, royal loan commissions, which were liable to be unpopular, employed considerable 'verbal persuasion' to encourage their acceptance.[33] Such is the case with the commission issued in 1474 to request funds for the war with France. Candid instructions were issued by the commissioners for the public delivery of their king's demands, namely

> that the said Commission, or the Copie therof, be had & distuntely rad in all those places where the commissioners shalt induce the people to shewe their saide benevolence...[the] said Commissioners [should] moue the people by all the goodly meanes that thei can, that such grauntes as thei wol make in this behalf be in money for waging of men...[that] the said Comissioners do so moeve the people that the first daye of ffeuerer next coming may be the first day of payment for that on half parte of their seid beniuolences. (412-3)

A specific vocabulary is employed throughout the commission to impress its message. It is emphasised that the commissioners should 'induce' and 'moeve the people' to give money, but exactly what kind of compelling rhetoric is intended to be used here is unclear. Indeed, the openness of the command to 'moue the people by all the

[33] Doig, 'Political Propaganda', pp. 269, 271.

goodly meanes that thei can' evidently intends a degree of imaginative wordplay outside of the scope of the original decree. Proclamations could thus be used to repress or incite popular action, with their different objectives being acknowledged in their linguistic presentation and method of delivery.

However, the straightforwardness of this strategy is once more rendered problematic by its reliance upon language. Doig notes how the rhetorical embellishment of proclamations could lead to popular fears of invasion and xenophobia.[34] Furthermore, the treatment of the populace as a single entity might also encourage the development of dissidence by promoting a collective identity. The delivery of proclamations was enforced by fines for non-performance, and the sheriffs were required to record on the dorse of the document where and how it had been delivered.[35] Yet the very existence of procedures to oversee the delivery of proclamations indicates that concerns about the accuracy of their delivery were a reality. Doig notes that before the mid fifteenth century the faithful representation of a proclamation's contents to the public was reliant upon the precision of the scribe's translation of the original Latin or French.[36] Yet even with the transition to composing proclamations in English, the potential remained for misrepresentation or partial delivery to take place in a city with partisan interests. Thus apprehension about the loyalty of the provinces continued to exist beneath the self-assured rhetoric developed to assert the Yorkist regime.

These fears are discernible in certain phrases used by the Crown to promote the enforcement of its commands. Coventry's officials are frequently reminded that maintaining cohesion in the city is their most important duty, and that permitting disorder to go unpunished will fragment this ideal. Following another disturbance over the common lands in October 1480, the Prince sent a proclamation to the city demanding the common people to use the proper channels when seeking redress rather than undertake riots:

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[34] *Ibid.*, p. 273.

[35] James Masschaele, 'The Public Space of the Marketplace in Medieval England', *Speculum* 77 (2002), p. 397; Doig, 'Political Propaganda', pp. 260-1.

[36] Doig, 'Political Propaganda', pp. 268, 275.

> se ther be non vnlaweful assembleez, conventicles nor conspiracies made within the same Cite, nor that eny of you attempt or do thing by wey of feate for the pretense of eny right of the seid Cite; but þat yf ye fynde you wronged or greved to shewe hit vnto the Mair & Counceill of þe same. And so ye togeder, as on holy body vndevided, to sewe for the redresse therof according to the lawe wherin ye shall haue our help & assistance. (442)

Most significant here is the phrase 'on holy body vndevided'. 'Holy' in this context may mean both 'whole' and 'holy', constituting a sanctified unity based upon the Christian models of integration intended by the Corpus Christi celebrations. The same notion of accord is advocated in another letter from the Prince composed in September 1481. Addressing the city's officials this time, he requests that they will act immediately 'vppon the sight of these our lettres' to prevent further disturbances following the recent riots in the city: 'we trusting that ye, beyng of oon will, will sadly endeavour you to se the vttre punnysshement of the premissez in discoraging all oþer like offendours' (495). That both letters employ the same rhetoric despite being addressed to different audiences implies that the recent disturbances in the city had raised general questions about Coventry's orderliness. Although the dispute was essentially only a local issue, the emphasis placed upon the authorities to remain united under 'oon will' realises the government's fears that popular discontent might still be moulded into more progressive actions.

Lingering factional interests evidently continued to raise questions about the enforcement of the law in England's towns. Read in the light of these uncertainties, the command to deliver proclamations 'straytely' and 'openly' takes on new significance. A letter sent by Richard III in 1485 regarding the recent issue of ordinances to contain disorder in the city commends the authorities' actions, but is equally concerned with how they are to be enforced. The king commands

> that ye doo publisshe this our Commaundement vnto all thinhabitantes of our said Citie…to thentent that noon of theim shall haue mater or grownd of excuse, if they offend contrary to our Commaundment in this behalue. (524)

Openly proclaiming the ordinance is conceived as a way of eliminating any pretext for unrest caused by the ignorance of the citizens. Yet as the king's letter also

indicates, it is also the authorities themselves that are to be enjoined to observe these laws. In confirmation of their methods of punishment, the officials are urged to continue to reform recalcitrant individuals to the 'example and fere of other', and even more pointedly, to 'see that such Officers as be made or here-aftur shal-be made amonges yow doo mak there Othes for the sure obseruyng and kepyng of the said ordinaunces' (523). The inference here is that if Coventry's rulers accept the Crown's decrees, then they will themselves set a 'good example'.

Oath-taking is a significant factor in this arrangement because it obligates the officials to uphold their duty to both Coventry and the Crown.[37] Such pledges are also a corrective to the expression of opprobrious language in the urban environment. As a letter issued by Henry VII in 1489 regarding two cases of seditious speakers indicates, treasonable language is against the 'naturall duete of ligeance', whereas its suppression exhibits 'ffeithfull acquitail' (536-7). The division created by this judgment is not only a measure of loyal conduct but also an ultimatum aimed as much at those who enforce the law as it is at deviant speakers. Law enforcement may have been approached through a strict divide between the populace and the authorities, but the solidarity between the Crown and urban officials was by no means a given arrangement. In a period of such great turbulence, achieving compliance was an issue that threatened to undermine the corporate foundations of late medieval government.

The events of the 1470s exemplify this crisis, particularly in Coventry. In early July 1469, Edward IV wrote to the city to express his anxieties about the rebellions breaking out in the north of England as a result of the defection of the Earl of Warwick and Duke of Clarence. The king reported that:

> it ys come to our knowlache that dyvers malicious & ille disposyd persones, contrari vnto God & theire dueties, have cast & sowe in many & dyuers places of this our reaume, and yit continue dayly, vnfittyng and sedicious tales and langage amongus oure lege people to thentent to store and incense theym to rumour & commocion.
> (340)

[37] Cf. the proclamation issued 28 April 1471 outlining the oath of allegiance to Edward IV following his reclamation of the throne (367).

Casting the rebels as typical miscreants, the letter attempts to undermine the challenge posed to the king by representing their cause as a conspiracy to defame him and mislead the people. The methods by which they practise their deception are especially devious and replicate the insidious rumour-mongering previously decried among vagabonds: they have inflamed the people to rebel by propagating seditious language throughout the realm. Despite its rhetorical flourishes, the portrait of the king's enemies remains conventional. The same formulae are rehearsed again in response to the Lincolnshire Rebellion in 1470, when it was reported that

> our rebelles & owtward enemies intende in haste tyme to aryue in thys our Royaume, & that certain our subgiettes, there adherents, contrary to there dute and legiance in diuers parties of our lande arredy & assemble hem-selfe for the reteyning of our sayd enemies & rebelles, so that yffe their malice be not in briffe tyme mightily withstonden, It might growe to the grett Jupartie of vs & the destruccion of al our trew suggiettes. (353)

Reinforced by the threat of impending deposition, the impact of the king's letter lies not in its traditional warnings but in the fact that this drama of divided loyalties was being played out in Coventry. At the same time as Edward IV was writing to the city to demand support for the suppression of Robin of Redesdale's rebellion, the Earl of Warwick was also writing to request troops to overthrow the king (342). As Harris has observed, the high wages of 10d a day that was paid to the soldiers who were sent to assist the king may well imply that support for Edward was limited.[38] Following Edward IV's return to the throne in 1471, Coventry's liberties and civic sword were confiscated by the king, to be redeemed by the payment of £200 (370, 381 n.1). Coventry was subsequently pardoned in 1472 in recognition of the need to conciliate the city (381). The lapses in royal support that took place in these years are episodes that were ineffaceable, not only because they were recorded in civic records like the *Coventry Leet Book*, but also because the language available to the Crown to represent them was incapable of disguising them.

What the royal correspondence of the 1470s reveals is the problem of reconciling the language used to represent deviance and the reality of deviant actions.

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[38] *Coventry Leet Book*, p. 343 n.4. Note also the incorporation of the chronicle entry for this year on pp. 358-9, which clearly celebrates Henry VI's return to the throne.

Whereas under normal circumstances vocabularies were maintained by the desire to uphold unity and cohesion, the development of alternative codes as a result of political factionalism offered the potential to invalidate hegemonic languages. The process is tacitly recognised in the formulae used to represent deviance: speakers who use 'vnfittyng langage, inordinate & ceducious langage' initiate the growth of dissent, and potentially enable deposition. Although intricately linked to the unstable politics of the period, the weakening of the representative capacities of these terms is also due to the changes arising from vernacular development. The constant repetition of the terms used to define deviance evinces their inability to fully adapt to the changing linguistic environment and the creativity of new languages. The affected language witnessed emerging in Yorkist correspondence in the early 1470s represents a more dynamic response to the pressures of the political environment. Yet in being formulated as a response to factional pressures, its originality distinguishes it from the traditional code which it seeks to reinforce. Whereas deviant linguistic forms are able to constantly evolve in form and substance, their official definition can only identify and re-label them, never completely overcome them.

5.4 Internal politics: The case of Laurence Saunders

To further explore the changing status of the discourse used to define deviance, it can be considered in relation to the languages that it sought to suppress. The *Coventry Leet Book* offers unusually detailed material for pursuing this line of enquiry. In the closing decades of the fifteenth century Coventry experienced a long-running dispute over the common lands spearheaded by one of its chamberlains, Laurence Saunders. Previous disputes over the common lands involving Coventry's citizens or its religious houses had been easily resolved, posing little problem for the representing record. However, Saunders's complaints were far more serious because of his position. As a prominent dyer, member of the dominant Holy Trinity and Corpus Christi guilds, and son of the ex-mayor, William Saunders, Laurence Saunders voiced his complaints from within the ruling oligarchy. By revealing their malpractice and allying with the common people in protest, the chamberlain's defiance undermined the authority and privileged identity of Coventry's civic elite. The records of Saunders's actions in the *Leet Book* are the only extant accounts of the case, and in accordance with its corporate design, are structured to counteract his affront and

restore civic honour.[39] Yet although these accounts were formulated around a unified intention, they are not univocal, comprising the voices of the civic authorities, the Crown, Saunders, and Coventry's citizens. This means that deviant languages and languages about deviance can be compared and evaluated side by side.[40]

Previous studies of Saunders's case have been limited to narrative reconstructions, giving little or no consideration to the politics surrounding the construction of the *Leet Book*'s records.[41] Precedents for taking a more analytical approach to the documentary evidence are provided by studies of other urban dissidents, including Paul Strohm's study of the fabrications woven into the case of Nicholas Brembre,[42] Caroline Barron's study of Ralph Holland,[43] and Anne Hudson's contrasting accounts of the Lollard preacher Richard Wyche.[44] Because the *Leet Book* represents a self-contained account of Coventry's civic affairs, it is possible to regard the records of the events in Saunders's campaign as being intentionally interlinked to form a larger narrative. The scribes' emphasises and choices of vocabulary are thus particularly significant for both their relation of particular events and their overall design as they wrote up the *Leet Book* into a fair copy. Although it is impossible to know where revisions and omissions may have been made in these accounts, the *Leet Book*'s other contents make it possible to read Saunders's case in relation to the city's

[39] Harris notes that, from 1465 onwards, the scribes of the *Leet Book* records were largely contemporary to the events that they record. Events relating to Saunders's case appear to have been recorded by scribes B and C, who were writing in the period 1480-1520. Scribe B has been identified as John Boteler, possibly a relation of the Recorder, Henry Boteler, with whom Saunders had a particularly inflammatory relationship. Confirmation of this identity requires further investigation in the original manuscript, but if correct, would explain Saunders's representation in relation to the Recorder. *Coventry Leet Book*, pp. 845-6.

[40] Mary Dormer Harris observed this linguistic difference but did not explore its ramifications in her account of Laurence Saunders's case; 'Laurence Saunders, Citizen of Coventry', *English Historical Review* 9 (1984), p. 633. Barron likewise observes that the city records of medieval London are misleading in their presentation of a unified political culture, plurality being integral to its economic strength and political instability; 'Political Culture', p. 132.

[41] Besides Harris's account cited above, see also Chris Humphrey, *The Politics of Carnival: Festive Misrule in Medieval England*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001) pp. 87-9; John Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century*, (London: Blandford Press, 1971), pp. 371-6; and Paul Murray Kendall, *The Yorkist Age: Daily Life during the Wars of the Roses*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962), pp. 117-33.

[42] Paul Strohm, 'Hochon's Arrow', in his *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 11-31.

[43] Caroline M. Barron, 'Ralph Holland and the London Radicals, 1438-1444', in *The Medieval Town: A Reader in English Urban History, 1200-1540*, ed. Richard Holt and Gervase Rosser, (London and New York: Longman, 1990), pp. 160-83.

[44] Anne Hudson, 'Which Wyche? The Framing of the Lollard Heretic and/ or Saint', in *Texts and the Repression of Medieval Heresy*, ed. Caterina Bruschi and Peter Biller, (York: York Medieval Press, 2003), pp. 221-37

wider political fortunes. Not only did Coventry continue to experience an unstable relationship with the Crown, but the records also indicate that the prestige associated with holding office was declining, perhaps as a result of the downturn in the city's economic fortunes. Saunders's case may have been the most high-profile dispute over the authorities' application of their powers but it was also part of a more general devaluation of civic ideals occurring in late medieval Coventry.

Disputes over the authorities' allocation of the common lands had been taking place for some years before Saunders was elected as chamberlain in 1480. These quarrels mainly addressed ownership of the common lands and its customary uses. Resolution was often difficult to reach in cases where customary practices were involved because of the reliance upon memory and tradition for their regulation. Even where written records were involved, disagreement could arise as to their meaning. For instance, Prior Deram of the convent of the cathedral claimed ownership of part of the common land in 1480 based upon a tripartite indenture agreed between the prior, Queen Isabella, and the city in 1355. Coventry's officials responded with the comment that 'the wordes in the seid Tripartite be not so speciall & streyt as the seid prior taketh hem' (456). Other individuals sought to gain advantage by involving other citizens. William Briscowe attempted to use these tactics after his initial attempts to enlarge his enclosures in 1469 and 1472 had only succeeded in drawing attention to his father's misappropriation of these lands during his time as mayor (349-51, 376-81). Farming rights to these lands were reclaimed by the city authorities, resulting in the outbreak of a riot in 1481. Although absent from the affray, Briscowe was blamed for inciting the people with his

> gret malice...so that grete part of the people vnderstanded þat he be his longe defferynges, cautels, vexacions & troubles, he wold neuer haue conclucion, but fynde measne of trouble & vexacion to hurt & disheryte the pore comiens here of rightfull comen. (494)

By stressing Briscowe's history of dispute, the mayor challenges the validity of his actions by identifying his inclination for mischief-making. Yet in acknowledging the impact of Briscowe's case upon the people, the mayor's judgment also represents how it had entered the popular imagination. Barron has noted that knowledge of past struggles and an awareness of customary practices were increasingly used by the

commons in their political bargaining.[45] The fact that disputes over the common lands overlapped, and that cases like Briscowe's and Saunders's were so protracted, indicates that they tallied with popular dissatisfaction about the ruling oligarchy's appropriation of common lands.

Saunders became the figurehead for these disputes because his position entailed the supervision of these lands' use. His campaign against the authorities erupted in May 1480 when he and another chamberlain, William Hede, refused to pay some labourers who were repairing the town wall because the murage dues allotted to the chamberlains were constantly insufficient. Saunders and Hede were subsequently committed to prison for defying the mayor's order to pay the labourers, 'seying presumptuously to the seid Maire That they that set them awarke shuld pay for hym' (431). Upon being further questioned, it emerged that Saunders's disobedience also arose from his refusal to uphold the authorities' misadministration of the common lands. In an agreement between the Prior, the mayor and the recorder, common lands had been withheld and a surcharge applied to limit the number of sheep that could graze on open pasture. Not only did this permit the ruling oligarchy to keep unlimited flocks, but they were also receiving payments from rich landowners to illegally enclose parts of the common land. As Harris observes, these abuses created great resentment in a city where cloth production was a staple trade.[46] In an effort to redress his superiors' actions, Saunders had been zealously enforcing his duties by impounding animals that were being grazed unlawfully and imposing fines upon their owners. Yet by publicly undermining his superiors and highlighting the corrupt practices of the city's government, Saunders posed a dangerous example to Coventry's citizens.

The precariousness of the case is made apparent in the way that it is reported. Since the founding of the Holy Trinity and Corpus Christi guilds by Edward III, Coventry's ruling oligarchy had always been drawn from their members. Highly traditional and guarding their privileges jealously, the twenty-four members of the ruling oligarchy and the twenty-four that sat on the leet were unlikely to be sympathetic to Saunders's criticisms. A £10 fine was consequently imposed upon the

[45] Barron, 'Political culture', p. 131.
[46] Harris, 'Laurence Saunders's, p. 639.

chamberlains as a penalty for their 'disobeysaunce and mysdemeasnyng' (431). However, according to the *Leet Book* account, Saunders continued to distrain cattle and be 'as wilfully disposed as he was before…and in maner disdeyned at all tymes to be ruled be the seid Maire' (432). This defiance culminated in his requesting the mayor for a licence to ride to Southampton, which he used to ride to Ludlow to petition the Prince's intervention. In response to the Prince's enquiries about Saunders's accusations, the Mayor requested

> that þe hasty, sinistre and seducious suggestion & labour made be Laurens Saunders…ayenst þe will and assent of þe gouernours of þis your Cite be not printed in your remembraunce. Ffor he diuers tymes this yer hath openly disobeyed me your seid seruant, Mair here, and the rule of this Cite, and be his powior wolde enduce commocion amonges the people; and where he is sugget & seruant he wold subdue vs all, yf he might gete assistance, to þe worst ensample that euer was here. (433-4)

Rather than specify his deviant actions, the Mayor focuses instead upon Saunders's deviousness – a character trait which exposes his subversive inclinations, but was beyond the council's ability to foresee. By depicting Saunders's delinquency as a concealed action, the Mayor is able to reposition the council as faithful subjects, stressing that Saunders's actions were not only unprecedented, but so unusual that they do not merit the Crown's further attention, and especially its 'remembraunce'. The Crown endorsed this presentation in its reply, urging the mayor to punish Saunders and anyone else inclined to 'attempt eny thing to þe hurte, troble or perturbaunce of þe seid Cite' (435). By mimicking each other's language, the city officials and the Crown reaffirmed their trust in each other and successfully invalidated the dangers posed by Saunders's affront.

Besides the carefully constructed presentation issued to the prince, the city also sought to record the internal tensions raised by Saunders's disputes. This included a transcription of Saunders's petition to the prince in the *Leet Book*. It is a catalogue of all the distrained sheep that the mayor permitted to be released without payment of the due fine, and a list of all the lands that the Chamberlain believed to be common. Particular attention is paid to the behaviour of the Recorder, Henry Boteler, in the description of these events. Saunders recounted how he and William Hede had

been committed to prison in April 1480 for distraining sheep, and had each been bound to pay £40 as surety for their obedience. After their initial payment of £4, the chamberlains pleaded to be released from their bond, to which the Recorder replied that 'they shuld not be relesed þerof for þe best pece of scarlet in Englond' (438). Later in July when a dispute broke out over the Prior's use of lands known as Bradock Waste, Saunders only increased the Recorder's anger by asserting that the lands were common:

> And then the seid recordor seide that he wold make the seid Chamberlein to curse the tyme that euer he sigh him and wolde make him to wepe water with his yen. And for to revenged vppon hym he saide he wolde ryde to complayne vppon him vnto oure soueraign lorde the kyng. (439)

Read from Saunders's perspective, these inflammatory comments are an indication of the unprincipled outlook of Coventry's civic elite. For the authorities, such claims were a measure of the Chamberlain's disruptive influence, and provided grounds for his punishment. Following the submission of his fellow Chamberlain, William Hede, and the Prince's judgment that Saunders was concerned only to achieve revenge upon the Mayor in pursuing his suits, he was returned to the Mayor to be punished. Like all individuals who spoke unfitting language to authority figures, Saunders was required to make public submission and beg pardon:

> Laurens kneled don before the seid Maire & ther openly knoleched his offence & dissobeysaunce had & made to þe seid Maire in tyme past; wherof he besought hym of foryffenes; and there openly & lowley submitted hym-self vnto þe correccion of the seid Maire. (442)

Saunders's penitential reformation before his fellow officers was followed by his return to prison, where he was to remain under obligation of £500 'till certente were had of þe sadde demeasnyng of þe seid Laurens' (443). By 1485 he had been permitted to return to office, making the account of Saunders's restitution a model of the city authorities' ability to rehabilitate offenders.

However, the Chamberlain's capitulation did not mean that his grievances were forgotten, but his treatment by Coventry's officials over the next couple of years reveals a more tentative approach towards him. When Prior Deram disputed his

common land rights with the city in 1480, he alleged that Saunders 'with other diuerse vndisposed persons, noysen & sklaunderen the seid priour in the Citie, saying that he kepeth diuerse pastures in seueralte, which owen to be comen' (447). In the Mayor's response, Saunders was reported to have denied defaming him, having

> neuer noysed eny pasture of the seid Priour to be comen but such as [he] vnderstandes owen to be Comen be the blak boke of theis Citie, which specifieth þe certente of comen. (464)

It is notable that in asserting Saunders's innocence specific reference is made to the 'blak boke of theis Citie', which may well have been the *Leet Book*. The fact that this central civic record contained evidence of all of the lands which were common collapses both the Prior's claim and any future questions which Saunders might be tempted to make. Yet despite the Mayor's careful manoeuvring, the Prior's awareness of Saunders's disobedience reveals his anomalous position within the council. In his earlier petition, Saunders had identified the Prior and William Briscowe as seeking to deprive the people of their right to farm common land, meaning that the Prior's allegations may have been just. By 1482, Saunders had reverted back to his disputes, this time following up some of Briscowe's old claims. Reports of the Chamberlain's actions thus reverted back to stressing his disobedience. Refusing to concede the council's evidence that he was wrong, Saunders 'desired a copy of þat Evidence to schewe certen people in þe Citie as he shuld please etc.; & such other vntowardly wordes there vttered and wold not oþerwise be ruled then after his owne will' (511). The Chamberlain was again committed to prison, where he was warned by the king's council that 'yf he cam the iij^{de} tyme in warde for such matieres, hit schulde cost hym his hedde' (511-2). It is a warning that exemplifies the supposed leniency of the council in continuing to pardon Saunders, but also indicates that they would not permit such clemency indefinitely.

The *Leet Book*'s calculated presentations depict Saunders as an unprincipled troublemaker, yet the Chamberlain was not the city's only recalcitrant official. In 1484 Saunders's enemy, the Recorder, Henry Boteler, was upbraided for having 'said that he had as gret power as had the Mair' (520). These 'seducious premissez' required him to reaffirm his oath of allegiance to the Mayor. Although probably only arising as a result of a personal dispute, as an action of potentially subversive design,

memories of Saunders's intransigence must not have been far from the Mayor's mind. Whatever the background to the case, it was decided in December 1485 that a new Recorder was required because of Boteler's 'grett febulnes'. As a condition of the new Recorder's post, it was agreed by the Council

> that who-so-ever shall Ocapie the Offesse of Recourdershyp shall not be of Cowncell nor of fee with the prior of the Cathedrall Chourch of our Lady of Coventry nor with his successoures, nor with noo persown of the Countrey, aȝenst any person dwelling withyn the Cite of Coventre. (525)

Stipulations of this kind are a testament to the disruption created by the common land disputes that had been raging in the city. That the Council's unity might be permanently undermined if more members were seen to be involved in these causes was clearly a very real concern, and indicates that the prestige associated with holding office was starting to become tarnished. It is striking that both Thomas Kebull and John Brown who were asked to fill the office of recorder declined the post. Following Henry Boteler's death, Henry VII wrote to the city in 1490 to urge them to appoint another recorder, and to notify him of the name of that person so that he could be approved. Although stating that his intention was not 'to lette nor enterupte your libertie but to aduersitese you for the good disposiccion off that office' (537), the King's interest in Coventry's governance may have arisen because of rumours about seditious language being uttered in the city (536).

Coventry's internal politics were thus far from harmonious, and it is possible that Saunders was used as a scapegoat for more pervasive tensions. Having been kept out of trouble by the £200 bond imposed upon him for his good behaviour, Saunders suddenly reappears as a disruptive force in the *Leet Book* records in 1494. On Lammas Day, traditionally the time when the common lands were opened to the public, Saunders was accused of having distrained William Boteler's cart and freely distributed its load of oats among the common people because the crop had been grown on common lands. It is possible that Saunders singled out William Boteler because he was a relation of his old adversary, the Recorder. Yet although Saunders committed Boteler to ward without the Mayor's authority, his actions originated from what his job required of him. The official report of the event upholds a very different

opinion, however. Preceding the account is the report that Saunders had attempted to incite 'comocion & insurrection' among forty assembled onlookers by announcing:

> Sirs, here me! We shall neuer haue oure right till we haue striken of the hedes of iij or iiij of thes Churles hedes that rulen vs; and yf thereafter hit be asked who did þat dede hit shal-be seid me & they & they & me. (556)

Whether Saunders actually made these claims cannot be determined, but his hostility to the ruling regime was considered a step too far. As James Scott has observed, 'Actions by elites that *publicly* contradict the basis of a claim to power are threatening', and therefore the Council took immediate action to disable his power.[47] Saunders was discharged from riding with the other chamberlains on Lammas day, dismissed from the Council, and recommitted to prison.

As Saunders's defiance of the Council increased, official presentation of his actions became more flamboyant, focusing particularly upon his language. Following the imposition of a £40 fine for his disobedience, Saunders wrote to the king in 1496 and obtained release from £10 of his payment and a request for the Mayor to investigate the disputed common lands. In response, the Mayor composed a letter to be forwarded by the Recorder to the king outlining 'þe grete and many offences þat þe seid Laurence had doon in tymes past' (575). This is supplemented in the *Leet Book* by a florid account of Saunders's verbal abuse before the report was sent. The mayor alleged that Saunders came to his house and addressed him with the following words:

> Maister Maire, I aduise yewe to loke wisely on your-self, for or Lammasse day ye shall here other tythynges. & ffor many of these caitifes þat loke so hy nowe, shal-be brought lower. & ye knowe wele amongist yowe ye haue of myn x li. of money, which I dought not I shall haue ayen or lammasse day, or ells iij or iiij of þe best of yowe shall smart. Therfore I advise you bere vp-right þe swerd at your peril, for ye shall knowe more shortly. (575)

Saunders then appeared in court to resubmit his list of the lands he believed to be common, where he taunted the Mayor by again calling him to 'hold vp-right your

[47] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 11 (author's italics).

swerde, for as for Maister Recorder I haue Rekened with hym before the kyng, and he shall be easy Inough' (575). By referring to the mayor's sword, Saunders was highlighting the oligarchy's tyrannical rule in the city and deriding the Mayor's ability to deliver justice.[48] As Barron observes, in London's 'Midsummer Watch' the mayor rode as the city's king with the sword bearer preceding him holding the city's sword, which was intended to express 'the common consensus about the importance and the power which the mayor exercised'.[49] Saunders's language thus struck at the heart of the oligarchy's civic ideal, threatening to disempower the Council and even overturn it.

By making Saunders's alleged subversive language the focus of the *Leet Book* records, attention is shifted away from the Council's incapacity and limits are placed upon the scope of the dissidence raised by the disputes over the common lands. Yet alongside this central narrative run other versions of Saunders's dispute that indicate the existence of alternative perspectives. When Saunders was dismissed from riding with the chamberlains on Lammas day, limitations were also placed upon the common people that could join the procession:

> as in tymes past þer hath be dyuers riottes & offences & gret discorde don & commytted vppon Lammasse day caused be þat þat many in nombre vndesired ryden with þe Chamberleyns, hit is þerfor ordeyned be þese present lete that frohensfurth for euer ther shall but ij or iij at most of a warde ruyde with þe seid Chamberleyns vppon Lammasse, & they to be assigned & named be þe Meire & his Counceill v or vj daies before Lammasse. (565)

Clearly it was not only Saunders but his popular following within the city that was considered to be a problem. Following the injunction, a bill was pinned to the door of St Michael's church complaining of the restricted freedoms in the city: 'Be it knowen & vnderstand/ This Cite shuld be free & nowe is bonde' (567). As well as highlighting the taxes imposed upon particular trades, direct reference was also made to the Mayor's recent judgment upon Saunders and the restrictions placed upon the Lammas day procession:

[48] Harris linked these remarks to Richard II's order in 1384 that the current mayor, John Deister, should have the sword borne behind him because he did not maintain justice in the city. Harris, 'Laurence Saunders's, p. 648, and *Coventry Leet Book*, p. 575 n.3.
[49] Barron, 'Political Culture', p. 116.

...And now a noþer rule ye do make
þat non shall ryde at Lammas but they þat ȝe take.
...
Ye haue put on a man like a Scot to raunsome.
þat wolbe remembred when ȝe haue all forgoten.
Caviat. (567; ll. 9-10, 13-4)

The warnings issued in the poem indicate that Saunders's disputes had struck a chord with members of the trade guild members who were angered by the omnipotence of the ruling regime. No comment was made about the verses in the *Leet Book* other than that they were written 'be some evell disposed person vnknowen' (567), but the fact that they were included in the record may indicate that they were intended to provide evidence of Saunders's disruptive influence upon Coventry's citizens.

Indeed, following his outbursts against the Mayor when Saunders was again committed to ward, two more bills were posted on the Minster door. Although again transcribed without comment, it is intimated that Saunders's 'seducious wordes' to the Mayor were a further example of the kind of language that he had used to incite the people, and was responsible for the production of these 'seducious billes' in his favour (577). The first bill admonishes the authorities for their treatment of Saunders:

You have hunted the hare,
You holde him in a snare; } Hit had be as goode nay.

Ye þat be of myght,
Se that ye do right, } Thynk on your othe. (577; ll. 3-6)

Proverbial in expression and prophetic in tone, it calls for justice to be implemented or else the people, who are depicted as vengeful bees and wasps, will strike: 'Loke þat ye do right./ Both day & nyght,/ } be-ware of wappys' (577). The second bill was more specific to Saunders's disputes over the common lands. Repeating the idea of the bonded city, the poem strongly enforces the rights of the commonalty by threatening the withdrawal of their support from the ruling body:

We may speke feire & bid you good morowe,
But luff with our hertes shull ye haue non.

Cherish þe Cominalte & se they haue their right

Ffor drede of a worse chaunce be day or be nyght.

Þe best of you all litell worth shuld be
And ye had not help of the Cominalte. (578; ll. 15-20)

In urging the authorities to act for the good of the commonweal, the poem employs a more traditional rhetoric of protest. Not only is this a different language from that used by the authorities, but it also differs from that used in the first bill. Popular politics in Coventry thus assumes a multivocal address, merging precise complaints with more general cautionary expressions and threats of retaliation. The bills were evidently produced by Saunders's supporters, who were most likely other guild members, but their different addresses show that they were appealing to a much broader cross-section of Coventry's population. As such, these poems also project the silhouette of those individuals who participated in the riots over the common lands, but who were not literate or wealthy enough to express themselves in written complaint. That these voices exist in the *Leet Book* indicates that the political situation in late medieval Coventry involved more than just individual transgressors.

What the *Leet Book* ultimately records in Saunders's story is a catalogue of the tensions and anxieties experienced within Coventry as the city struggled to cope with the changes that occurred in the fifteenth century and the disorder they inspired. The Chamberlain's dispute with his fellow officials not only exposes the fraught relationship between officials and citizens, but lays bare the very mechanisms by which official power was upheld. That Saunders's criticisms emanated from within Coventry's ruling elite was dangerous enough, but his attempts to engage the common people and the Crown in his suit made him a perilous political adversary. By blurring traditional political allegiances, Saunders revealed how the government operated through a network of relationships and interactions. In order to maintain supremacy, the governing elite were in constant competition with the critical voices that sought to undermine them. It is particularly striking that in confronting Saunders the authorities privileged his audacious language as a measure of his deviance. Yet whereas Saunders's opprobrious language is threatening, in the mouths of the authorities it serves to chastise. In this way, a figure from within the ruling regime was repositioned as the typical outcast rebel leader.

Following his final fall from grace, Saunders was sent to London to appear before the king's council, where the reversal of his position was confirmed by the king. Saunders's complaints were judged to have been 'feined and contrived' by a 'seditious' man who had of his 'gret presumpcon and obstinacie not seldom but often tymes disobeyed the leefell...precepts of you the said maior...and [by] right evil and pernetioux example' encouraged others 'to offende likewise'.[50] As was now standard, the only decreed remembrance to be had of the old chamberlain was that he be made an example of to deter future offenders. In being classified according to these traditional deviant terms, Saunders's history was rewritten to preserve the hegemony and civic values of Coventry's ruling elite. Yet with its subtle crafting and intricate design, the *Leet Book* records of Saunders's history show that maintaining this contested authority was subject to processes that were increasingly intricate, evasive, and potentially provocative.

5.5 Conclusion

Labelling deviance was primarily a means of control, and any changes to this language denote responses to shifts in the balance of power. The unsettled political conditions of the second half of the fifteenth century particularly influenced the way that misconduct was defined. However, changes in the meaning and purpose of the terms used to define deviance signify more than just reflexive responses to transition and disorder. As a discourse that was used by different parties to both represent and influence the contexts within which it operated, its adaptation marks both a reaction to external pressures and an attempt to manipulate them in the maintenance of power. The various records contained in the *Coventry Leet Book* provide perfect examples of such linguistic manoeuvring. By examining how deviance is represented across these records, it is possible to see how common issues about power and authority altered the import of the language used. As different groups competed to achieve supremacy, the language that they used became more a means for diverting deviance than completely dispelling it. In the transfer from royal decree to local authorities to common audience the potential for re-articulation and reinterpretation occurred at each stage. Factional

[50] Harris, 'Laurence Saunders's, p. 651.

allegiances and self-interested motives were thus able to fragment the unity of this legal code, challenging its univocal appearance.

Yet although political circumstances gave shape to these linguistic conflicts, it was the changing status of the vernacular and its increasingly widespread use that enabled them. By using a common language, it was no longer possible to separate elite and popular politics with the same distinction as when Latin and French had been used. This meant that new strategies were required to respond to threats such as opprobrious language. At the same time, however, the use of English was also acknowledged for its capacity to incite popular support and formulate radical political gestures based upon their allegiance. As a result, forms of opprobrious expression became both a source of great unease and a language which could be exploited to gain political advantage. Linguistic dexterity became a crucial bargaining tool across the social hierarchy, with the result that it was sometimes difficult to differentiate dissident voices from official expression. Such is the case both in relation to the factional wrangling witnessed in national politics, and in the internal disputes faced by Coventry's ruling oligarchy. Not only were perceptions of deviance altered by these struggles, but in responding to the implications of language change, attempts were made to resignify and reinvent official discourse. It is telling, if not ironic, that the developments that were intended to maintain the authority of this discourse were informed by the very principles of appropriation and mimicry that empowered and sustained the deviant.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 Opprobrious language and the development of the vernacular

This thesis has produced two interconnected arguments: that perceptions of the disruptiveness of opprobrious language were influenced by the tensions arising from vernacular development in fifteenth-century England; and that by examining how different social groups determined and deployed acceptable and unacceptable language, a model of vernacular development can be produced that takes into account the fundamental cultural negotiations that attended this process. It has been argued that, in order to understand how the changing status of the vernacular influenced its development as an official language, it must be regarded as comprising multiple vernaculars which were in constant competition. These conflicts and the negotiations that they inspired can be traced by looking outside of the binary oppositions and legal categories that were imposed to contain them. Moreover, new languages were generated by this process, and are particularly conspicuous in the form of opprobrious expression. Producing a broader understanding of opprobrious language than just abuse or insult enables linguistic deviance to be considered as a social phenomenon that gains specific currency in the fifteenth century.

By examining the representation of opprobrious language in a range of non-canonical literatures, this thesis has sought to identify the various factors that led to the politicisation of certain forms of speech and writing. In answering the question of why language became so contentious in the fifteenth century, it has been argued that cumulative changes must be considered as being more influential than decisive shifts or single events. It is for this reason that chapter one takes the imposition of religious censorship as a point of departure, rather than as the endpoint that it is often seen to be. Identifying the grey area that existed between the binaries imposed by the Church reveals both the constant negotiation that was required to uphold them, and their increasing inflexibility in comparison with the social and cultural environment in which they were applied. By addressing the conflicts which underlay the Church's exemplary discourse on opprobrious language, controversy about vernacular use can be understood as influencing how this official code was applied. Although the

repressive measures of censorship identified religious texts in the vernacular as indications of heretical belief, the status of the owners of these texts was often as controversial. The same concerns can be witnessed surrounding opprobrious language, where the renunciation of God through blasphemous expression signalled the potential for wider non-conformity and separatism.

It is thus important to look at the tensions surrounding vernacular development rather than just the political responses that it inspired. Especially significant is the fact that the Church's regime of censorship was part of a broader governmental programme to limit dissident voices. The concept of seditious speech, the nationalistic 'propaganda' produced by the Lancastrian monarchs, and the delivery of proclamations in English all represent significant attempts to restrict dissent and shape popular opinion. As well as identifying the insecurities of the ruling regime, these policies helped to shape the political consciousness of the common people. Although emergent in the fourteenth century, popular political comment become more persistent and powerful in the fifteenth century as the government collapsed into factional division and order broke down. However, as argued in chapter three, critical voices were not simply reactionary. The ability to make powerful political comments was largely enabled by the conjunction of social and economic changes. These changes included the restructuring of the social hierarchy; the increased availability of education; the growth of literacy; and the extension of reading groups and networks of news exchange. Both the transmission of moral lyrics on opprobrious language and the Paston letters evidence how these developments permitted material to be reinterpreted and used for personal advantage.

Concerns about the extension of the linguistic community as a result of the development of the vernacular can be seen to underlie official actions to limit opprobrious language. Expressing fears about the disruptive capacity of contemptuous language, whether that be from a moral or political perspective, indicates a need to reinforce control. From the perspective of the disapproving speaker, such language represents the means to question the distribution of power and authority and perhaps propose alternative world views. That opprobrious language was prosecuted and moralised about more frequently in the fifteenth century shows how social, cultural, and political boundaries were being explored and restructured as a result of the

changes witnessed in the period. Rather than simply being identified as representing localised discontent or disorderly speech, opprobrious language was envisaged as a more pervasive and destructive force. The popularisation of these ideas in exempla and moral lyrics coincided with the politicisation of language to overlay opprobrious expression with exceptional status. This unique position represents a specific point in the development of English as a national language. As Horodowich has likewise observed in her study of the controversies over language use in sixteenth-century Venice, 'Debate over a standard language was a sign that other political and social changes were taking place'.[1] Legislation against opprobrious expression may have reinforced limits upon what could and could not be said, but in doing so, it also confirmed the power that could be commanded by using such language.

The linguistic situation witnessed in the fifteenth century is thus one where the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable speech were being repositioned. As the need to maintain the authority of official discourses clashed with the emergence of new voices, distinguishing legitimate and illegitimate voices became increasingly complicated. Changes in the usage of words, the formation of new vocabularies, and the construction of hierarchies of language identify the negotiations taking place between different social groups as they sought to control meaning and interpretation. The appropriation and reinvention of traditional topoi and symbols were commonplaces in any period, representing the way that cultural ideas were developed and diffused.[2] Marion Turner has argued that the meaning of words is not completely open to interpretation, but instead revolves around certain innate connotations.[3] Yet although it is true that there are limits governing the meanings that surround words, it is also important to observe that these are not necessarily predetermined. Audiences could misunderstand and distort language and ideas; scribes could miscopy information; and even in a single text, different discourses 'can reinforce one another,

[1] Elizabeth Horodowich, 'Civic Identity and the Control of Blasphemy in Sixteenth-Century Venice', *Past and Present* 181 (2003), pp. 3-4.

[2] See, for instance, Lesley Coote and Tim Thornton's comments about the reworking of prophetic discourse in the medieval and Tudor periods in, 'Merlin, Erceldoune, Nixon: A Tradition of Popular Political Prophecy', *New Medieval Literatures* 4, (2001), p. 126.

[3] Marion Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth-Century London*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 56.

conflict, or offer alternative...perspectives'.[4] Thus, as Elisabeth Salter suggests, 'The status of meaning in modes of expression should therefore be questioned'.[5]

What appears to have been at issue in the fifteenth century, and more so than in any previous period, was who controlled meaning and who had the right to decide it. By extending the terms used to classify misconduct and imposing the category of 'seditious speech', the government aimed to achieve greater control over deviant voices. Yet as the application of these vocabularies in the Paston letters and the *Coventry Leet Book* show, these legal codes had to be used in increasingly innovative ways in order to retain their relevance. As political circumstances altered, a rift grew between the language used to classify deviance and the deviant languages and actions that it sought to represent. As Anne Clark Bartlett and Thomas Bestul have observed, in order to be effective, any discourse or text must exist within the boundaries of what an audience considers to be right.[6] Thus, it was not only the instability caused by opprobrious language that was at issue, but also the incapacity of traditional moral discourse to represent it.

In all of the material explored in this thesis, the power to speak is increasingly regarded as a threat that would undermine the power of the official discourses that seek to suppress it. The problem of how to limit defiant language became even more complicated as the political context within which it was used fragmented. Under these conditions, critical language was used by both the authorities and the common people to identify governmental wrongdoing, to vilify political rivals, and incite support. Consequently, opprobrious language became a much more complex issue than simply defamatory comments made by subordinates about their superiors. The internal power struggles experienced in both Norwich and Coventry are indicative of how national political circumstances complicated the governance of these towns and the way that they understood and represented misconduct. Likewise, the need to legitimise successive governmental regimes meant that the tactics adopted by the Crown when addressing the towns and their citizens increasingly relied upon sensationalism for

[4] Anne Clark Bartlett, and Thomas H. Bestul, eds., *Cultures of Piety: Medieval English Devotional Literature in Translation*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 7.
[5] Elisabeth Salter, *Cultural Creativity in the Early English Renaissance: Popular Culture in Town and Country*, (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 169.
[6] Bartlett and Bestul, *Cultures of Piety*, p. 6.

their persuasion. It is striking that, in order to reassert control, the very linguistic practices that were considered so dangerous to unstable governments became the means by which they attempted to regain authority. By adopting the vernacular and using it to make opprobrious comments, the authorities attempted to disempower the voices that threatened them by mimicking their language and transforming it into an authorised form of expression. As such, the result was not so much the creation of a new language as a continued redeployment and re-signification of existing vocabularies.

What constituted opprobrious language can therefore only be understood by examining interlocking definitions rather than a single label. 'Vernacular politics' is a useful term here for describing the processes by which the status of opprobrious expression was generated and mediated. Although this thesis focuses upon the peculiarly acute nature of vernacular politics in the fifteenth century, this is not to say that controversy about what could and could not be said did not re-emerge in relation to vernacular use in later periods. John Watts has suggested that, by the sixteenth century, popular voices of public protest were increasingly subsumed by the authorities.[7] Yet although criticism may have been redirected, this does not necessarily imply that these voices became totally integrated or that the tensions surrounding language were fully resolved. Successive governmental attempts to create and impose dynastic authority through particular linguistic strategies create artificial endings in the process of vernacular development. Therefore, it is perhaps more pertinent to think of opprobrious status as being continually reinvented in conjunction with changes in the balance of power instead of possessing defined beginning and end points.

With this in mind, we should be careful of placing too much emphasis upon Marjorie McIntosh's argument that fifteenth-century concerns about the disruptive effects of backbiting pose 'the background to the intense Tudor concern with the spreading of political rumours'.[8] Although fifteenth-century concerns about

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[7] John L. Watts, 'The Pressure of the Public on Later Medieval Politics', in *The Fifteenth Century IV: Political Culture in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. Linda Clark and Christine Carpenter, (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), p. 179.

[8] Marjorie K. McIntosh, 'Finding Language for Misconduct: Jurors in Fifteenth-Century Local Courts', in *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed.

opprobrious language most likely informed sixteenth-century Tudor policies, a far more thorough investigation of the social, cultural and political context of such legislation is necessary to establish both the nature of these influences and any crucial differences in approach. As such, it is important to avoid treating the fifteenth century as simply transitional or a precursor to more significant sixteenth-century developments. Instead of seeking to pinpoint only major shifts and crucial events, we can gain a more detailed picture if we consider how changes in linguistic values took place among particular groups. By looking at how language is used and meaning is established by different social actors, a range of opinions can be reconstructed that reveal the nature of the political and cultural negotiations inspired by vernacular development.

6.2 A model for fifteenth-century vernacular development

This thesis has charted changes in the *status* of the vernacular rather than aspects of its standardisation. Therefore, in addition to identifying how attitudes towards the vernacular were formed and how they influenced perceptions of language use, it is also possible to propose a model by which these changes can be charted, and possibly developed beyond the scope of the current thesis. The establishment of the vernacular as a common language did not involve a straightforward process whereby English replaced other languages. Because English was not a single language but consisted of multiple vernaculars, different ideas about its nature and potential coexisted in society. Therefore, development should not be considered as simply having been imposed from above, but as crystallising in different social groups who were developing their own linguistic standards. It is the friction created between groups as competing perceptions and linguistic uses clashed that provides the basis for changes in the status of language.

In order to understand the nature of these conflicts and how they arose, it is necessary to locate language use within a thorough understanding of the social

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Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 95. On Tudor legislation against seditious language, see Roger B. Manning, 'The Origins of the Doctrine of Sedition', *Albion* 12 (1980), 99-121, and Geoffrey R. Elton, *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

position and status of the groups to which they relate. However, this does not mean that these dynamics should just be understood in terms of their correspondence to standard social models. Rather than simply representing the language of the elite or non-elite, the linguistic attitudes developed by different social groups reveal more subtle mediations of cultural values. As Claire Sponsler has observed, these interactions are fundamental within any culture:

> culture is not monolithic but instead composed of competing, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting smaller groups that create their own patterns of life and define themselves through their distinctive institutions, beliefs and customs, social relations, and use of objects, thus developing symbolic systems that give expressive form to their social and material life-experiences.[9]

Appreciating the fluidity of cultural exchange offers an important corrective to ideas about the conformity of social groups. The idea of sub-cultures is useful here, but should not simply be considered as representing groups that existed on the margins of society. Although some groups were classed as marginal, their views should not be generalised or taken as a model for all individuals who expressed dissent or held alternative views. New social groupings were a feature of the fifteenth century as a result of social and economic changes, and the way that they constructed their identities and defined themselves through language is indicative of how the vernacular was adopted as a means of self-expression. Felicity Riddy has used the idea of subcultures positively as a means to explore youth culture and the reading practices of medieval women.[10] Tracing the way that ideas were transmitted through particular networks and how they influenced group beliefs offers a valuable way to examine the processes of social and cultural change across society.

Because the texts that record conflicts were often written by an overseeing authority, reconstructing the linguistic priorities of the groups involved is not always

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[9] Claire Sponsler, 'In Transit: Theorising Cultural Appropriation in Medieval Europe', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32 (2002), pp. 21-2. Sponsler's notion of cultural appropriation is derived from ethnographic studies by Dick Hebdige and Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson. See Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, (London: Methuen, 1979), and Hall and Jefferson, eds., *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Postwar Britain*, (London: Hutchinson, 1976).

[10] Felicity Riddy, 'Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text', *Speculum* 71 (1996), 66-86, and ''Women Talking About the Things of God': A Late Medieval Sub-Culture', in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale, second edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 104-27.

easy. This is particularly true of exceptional speech such as opprobrious language, where emotional responses could colour perceptions of its nature and meaning. However, although opprobrious language was more often talked about than recorded in full, the official vocabularies developed to describe and categorise it provide important indications of its perceived social and political impact. Moreover, variations in these representations among individuals and across texts provide examples of how different beliefs about the acceptability of language emerged within groups. Such divergence can be witnessed in the evaluation of seditious speech and rumour by vernacular chroniclers, and in the linguistic choices made by different members of the Paston family. In identifying these examples, their discrepancies and deviations are to be privileged rather than homogenised or exemplified as being generally socially representative. As Roger Chartier has argued, 'the ways in which an individual or a group appropriates an intellectual theme or a cultural form are more important than the statistical distribution of that theme or form'.[11] By admitting the existence of multiple voices and opinions, we come closer to understanding the nature of the dialogues and debates that shaped vernacular development.

6.3 Further work

The texts and areas covered by this thesis suggest the potential for studying the use and representation of opprobrious language as part of the development of the vernacular. There is scope for the material in each of the chapters in this thesis to be investigated further, and likewise for other areas to be explored in order to pursue the idea of vernacular politics and its cultural implications. As already suggested, the study could be extended into the sixteenth century by considering how Tudor policies and religious politics impinged upon linguistic attitudes. A starting point might be to re-evaluate the nature of seditious speech and the uses of prophecy in light of fifteenth-century precedents. Another subject that might profit from being extended back into the fifteenth century is the study of slander and defamation. A great deal of work has been done on the proliferation of defamation cases, the gendering of insults,

[11] Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, trans. L. G. Cochrane, (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press with Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 35. For the application of this approach in relation to ideas about cultural creativity and reading practices, see Salter, *Cultural Creativity*, p. 10, and Elisabeth E. Salter, ''The Dayes Moralised': Reconstructing Devotional Reading, c.1450-1560', in *Pieties in Transition: Religious Practices and Experiences, c. 1400-1640*, ed. Robert G. A. Lutton and Elisabeth E. Salter, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 147.

and the operation of the ecclesiastical courts in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.[12] Much less work has been undertaken in the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, perhaps chiefly because the evidence is not quite so plentiful and is largely recorded in Latin. An investigation of slander litigation in local communities and the representation of these cases in the depositions constructed by the ecclesiastical courts would provide another perspective upon perceptions of opprobrious language, and could balance or modify current arguments focused solely in the early modern period.

Potential for comparative treatments of slander and abusive language also exist in medieval drama. Because current work has focused almost exclusively upon the dramaturgical functions of such language, there is potential to explore its dramatic presentation in relation to its social and cultural dimensions. The drama would be particularly well suited to an exploration of how linguistic boundaries are structured and reset in performance because, besides the courts, medieval drama is perhaps the only material to contain extensive records of the actual abusive words used in popular English. Reconstructing these vocabularies according to the different ways that they are deployed may reflect cultural changes and reveal attempts to manipulate them. In addition, the mentalities which determined how slander was evaluated might be explored beyond the pulpit by examining popular prayers. The growth of literacy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the invention of printing meant that lay ownership of prayer books grew. Examining the composition of prayers which defend against slanderous comments or request the restoration of honour would provide an alternative perspective upon the perceived effects of opprobrious language among everyday people.

In this thesis, some attention has been paid to the value of manuscript study, and further work on the composition and distribution of the texts addressed here could only enhance the enquiry. It has already been noted that a more thorough investigation of moral lyrics on opprobrious language needs to be carried out, and that the critical vocabularies that we use to categorise different versions of these lyrics and the nature

[12] See, for example, Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), and J. A. Sharpe, *Defamation and Sexual Slander in Early Modern England: The Church Courts at York*, Borthwick papers 58, (York: Borthwick Institute, 1983).

of the manuscripts that contain them could be redressed. An examination of different versions of lyrics and exempla, and a thorough study of their manuscript presentations and contexts would be a profitable starting point. The cultural development of these instructional texts might also be investigated by considering their relation to proverb literature, instructional texts, and courtesy literature. By exploring their ideological foundations, it may be possible to consider why 'self-improvement' texts of this nature achieved such great popularity in the fifteenth century. Alternative methodologies from cultural studies, sociolinguistics, and anthropology might also be employed in these enquiries to provide better understandings of the social and cultural dynamics that were in operation. All of these avenues for possible further work indicate the great possibilities for studying language and its cultural significance, especially in the fifteenth century. More work is required to illuminate the complex nature of vernacular development and its social, cultural and political implications. It is hoped that this thesis might encourage such work to be undertaken.

Appendix 1
Lyrics on opprobrious language

The following list includes all of the known manuscripts containing copies of moral verses on opprobrious language current in the fifteenth century, as compiled from the indexes listed below. Verses are grouped by genre and author in accordance with their citation in chapter two.

Manuscript references are compiled from the following sources: Carleton Brown and Rossell Hope Robbins, eds., *The Index of Middle English Verse*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943); Rossell Hope Robbins and John L. Cutler, eds., *The Supplement to the Index of Middle English Verse*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965); Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards, eds., *A New Index of Middle English Verse*, (London: British Library, 2005); Cameron Louis, 'Proverbs, Precepts and Monitory Pieces', in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*, volume 9, gen. ed. A. E. Hartung, (New Haven, Connecticut: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1993), pp. 3372-3; Alan Renoir and C. David Benson, 'Lydgate', in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*, volume 6, ed. Hartung, (1980), pp. 2071-175; Siegfried Wenzel, 'Unrecorded Middle English Verses', *Anglia* 92 (1974), 55-78.

Lyrics

A leson to kepe well þe tonge

BL Additional MS 29729 (ff. 6v-7r)

Against swearing by the Mass

Balliol College Oxford MS 354 (6 stanzas) (f. 230)
Trinity College, Cambridge, MS 0.9.38 (7 stanzas) (f. 69v)

Against venomous tongues (John Skelton)

Print: Thomas Marshe, *Pithy Plesaunt and Profitable Workes of Maister Skelton*, London 1568, STC 22608

Al day we preche: al day we vse to teche

Lambeth Palace Library MS 78 (f. 67r)

Aȝens my felawes þat I haue spoken

NLS Advocates MS 18.7.21 (f. 45v)

Always try to say the best

Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Poet. a.1 (Vernon) (f. 411v)
BL Additional 22283 (Simeon) (f. 132v)
Princeton University MS Garrett 143 (f. 45r)
BL MS Cotton Caligula Aii (f. 68r)

Ewyr say wylle, or hold þe styll

NLW Brogyntyn MS II.I (MS Porkington 10) (ff. 150v-152r)

Fals titlaris now growis vp full rank (Robert Henryson)
NLS Advocates MS 1.1.6 (Bannatyne manuscript) (ff. 67v-68r)
Magdalene College, Cambridge, MS 2553/ Pepys MS 2553 (pp. 309-10)

He is a fole eke as seneke seythe
BL Harley MS 374 (f. 22r)

Hit falleth for euery gentilman
Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 2713 (f. 268r)
Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 11948 (Rawlinson MS C.83) (f. 31r)
Print: *Queen Anelida and False Arcyte*, Westminster 1477,
STC 5090 (f. 10r)

How darest thou swere or be so bold also
Trinity College, Cambridge, MS 1157 (f. 66r)

Hyre and see and say not all
Trinity College, Cambridge, MS 0.9.38 (f. 26v)

I loue and y dare nouȝt
Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Bühler MS 21 (f. iiir)

In troble & in thraull
BL Royal MS 17.A.xxxii (ff. 122r-v)

Lerne say wele, say litel, or say noȝt
Bodleian Library, Digby MS 102 (ff. 101v-103v)

Say weill is trewly ane wirthy gud thing
NLS Advocates MS 1.1.6 (Bannatyne manuscript) (f. 83r)
Victoria and Albert museum, Dyce MS 45 (f. 141v)
Print: *Ane Compendious Buik of Godlie Psalms*, 1567
John Hall, *Certayne Chapters Taken out of the Proverbes of Salomon*, 1549, STC 12634 (pp. A6v-A7r)

Sey þe best or be stylle
Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Bühler MS 21 (f. iiiv)
BL Harley MS 665 (f. 302r)

Seynt Bernard seiþ and so seye I
BL MS Royal 18.a.x (ff. 125r-126v)

Tel nouth þin frend
NLS Advocates MS 18.7.21 (f. 2r)

Ther is nomor dredfull pestelens
Cambridge University Library MS Ff.I.6 (ff. 150r-151r)

Ther nys in me comfort of gladnes (Charles d'Orleans)
BL Harley 682 (f. 134v)

To gyd thy tung
NLS Advocates MS 1.1.6 (Bannatyne manuscript) (f. 83v)

Truth ever is best
Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Poet. a.1 (Vernon manuscript) (ff. 409v-410r)
BL MS Additional 2283 (Simeon manuscript) (f. 131v)

Tutiuillus, þe devyl of hell
Bodleian Library Douce MS 104 (f. 112v)

Whate-ever thow sey, avyse thee welle!
Trinity College, Cambridge, MS 0.9.38 (ff. 48v-49r)

Who says the sooth, he shall be shent
Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Poet. a.1 (Vernon MS) (f. 408v)
BL Additional 22283 (Simeon MS) (f. 130r)
Trinity College, Cambridge, MS 0.9.38 (ff. 23r-24v)

Ȝif þou wys be wil
Huntingdon Library H M 147 (text of the *Vices and Virtues*) (f. 21r)
Advocates 18.7.21 (John of Grimestone's preaching book) (f. 151v)
BL Additional 17013 (text of the *Vices and Virtues*) (f. 5r)
Merton College, Oxford, MS 248 (f. 167r)

Carols

Be mery and suffre, as I the vise
Balliol College, Oxford, MS 354 (f. 231r)

Blowyng was mad for gret game
Bodleian Library MS Eng. Poet. e.1 (f. 22r)

Ittes knowyn in euery schyre
Bodleian Library MS Eng. Poet. e.1 (f. 28v)

Ther is non gres that growit on ground
BL MS Sloane 2593 (ff. 30r-30v)

Thi tunge is mad of fleych and blod
BL MS Sloane 2593 (f. 7r)

Whatsoeuer ye thynk, avyse ye wele
BL MS Harley 4294 (f. 81v)

With pety movyd, I am constreyned
Bodleian Library MS Eng. Poet. e.1 (ff. 50v-51r)

Lydgate

The cok hath lowe shoone

BL Harley MS 2255 (ff. 131v-135r)

Say the best and never repent (ballad and text)
Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 1475 (Laud Misc 598) (ff. 49r-v)

See myche, say lytell and lerne to soffar in tyme[1]
Corpus Christi College, Oxford, MS 203 (pp. 23-4)
BL Royal MS 2.D.xxxvii – five stanzas (f. 153r)
BL Additional MS 29729 (ff. 130r-v)
NLS Advocates 19.3.1 – one stanza (f. 61v)
Victoria and Albert Museum Dyce MS 34 (transcript of de Worde print)

A wicked tunge wille sey amys
Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 2527 (ff. 191v-193r)
Cambridge University Library MS Ff.I.6 (ff. 147r-149v)
Trinity College, Cambridge, MS 600 (pp. 15-20)
BL Harley MS 2251 (ff. 151r-2v)
BL Additional MS 29729 (ff. 149v-51v)
Lambeth Palace Library MS 344 (f. 10v)
Rome English College MS 1306/127/A.347 (ff. 76r-78r)
Huntingdon Library EL 26.A.13 (formerly Ellesmere 4) (ff. 20r-22r)
Print: Thynne, *Chaucer* (1532)

The following lyrics by Lydgate treat the subject of linguistic inconsistency rather than aspects of linguistic deviance:

Consulo quisquis eris
Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 3356 (f. 205r)
Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 6943 (ff. 29v-31v)
Cambridge University Library MS Hh.4.12 (ff. 82r-3v)
Jesus College, Cambridge, MS 56 (ff. 22v-5r)
Trinity College, Cambridge, MS 601 (ff. 296v-8r)
BL Harley MS 2251 – no stanza 12 (ff. 11v-13r)
BL Harley MS 2255 (ff. 1r-3r)
BL Additional 34360 – no stanza 12 (ff. 70v-2v)

Ryme without accord
BL Harley MS 2251 (ff. 26r-27r)
Cambridge, Pepys MS 2553 – eight stanzas (p. 171)
NLS Advocates MS 1.1.6 (Bannatyne MS) – stanza eight disarranged, missing two stanzas, and contains two additional stanzas (ff. 79r-v)
Print: Chepman and Myller, (1508), STC 11984 – eight stanzas

Tyed with a line
BL Harley MS 2251 – three stanzas (ff. 37v-39v)
BL Additional 29729 (ff. 131v-132r)

[1] Lydgate's authorhip of the poem is now questioned. Stow attributes the poem to 'R. Stokkys' in BL Add MS 29729. See Louis, 'Proverbs', p. 2975.

Huntingdon Library EL 26.A.13 (formerly Ellesmere 4) (f. 2v)
Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 3896 (Fairfax 16) – first stanza only (f. 195r)
Cambridge University Library Ff.I.6 – first stanza only (f. 151r)
BL Harley MS 7333 – first stanza only (f. 148r)
BL Harley MS 7578 – first stanza only (f. 20r)
BL Additional MS 5465 – first stanza only (f. 2v)
BL Additional MS 16165 – first stanza only (f. 244r)
Huntingdon Library HM 144 – first stanza only (f. 144r)

The world is variable

BL Harley MS 2255 (ff. 126v-128r)

Appendix 2
Lyrics on opprobrious language grouped by manuscript

The following list comprises all of the manuscripts that contain more than one moral verse on opprobrious language, with a brief description of their general contents.

Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Poet. a.1 (Vernon manuscript) (l. 14C)
Large anthology of vernacular religious texts, romances, and poetry.

Who says the sooth shall be shent	(f. 408v)
Truth ever is best	(ff. 409v-410r)
Charity is no longer cheer	(f. 410r)
Always try to say the best	(f. 411v)

BL MS Additional 2283 (Simeon manuscript) (l. 14C)
Near-identical sister-volume to the Vernon manuscript.

Who says the sooth shall be shent	(f. 130r)
Charity is no longer cheer	(f. 131r)
Truth ever is best	(f. 131v)
Always try to say the best	(f. 132v)
But thou say the sooth, thou shall be shent	(f. 134r)

NLS Advocates MS 18.7.21 (John of Grimestone's preaching book) (1372)
Collection of alphabetically-arranged preaching tags and verses.

Tel nouth þin frend	(f. 2r)
Aȝens my felawes þat I haue spoken	(f. 45v)
Ȝif þu wys be wil	(f. 151v)

Bodleian Library MS Eng. Poet. e.1 (15C)
Carol collection associated with Beverley Minster, Yorkshire.

Blowyng was mad for gret game	(f. 22r)
Ittes knowyn in euery schyre	(f. 28v)
With pety movyd, I am constreyned	(ff. 50v-51r)

BL Sloane MS 2593 (15C)
Carol collection associated with the Benedictine monastery at Bury St Edmunds.

Thi tunge is mad of fleych and blod	(f. 7r)
Ther is non gres that growit on ground	(ff. 30r-30v)

Trinity College, Cambridge, MS 0.9.38 (c. 1450)
Literary miscellany of popular English and Latin texts associated with Glastonbury Abbey.

Who says the sooth shall be shent	(ff. 23r-24v)
Hyre and see and say not all	(f. 26v)
Whate-ever thow sey, avyse thee welle	(ff. 48v-49r)
Against swearing by the Mass	(f. 69v)

Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Bühler MS 21 (15C)
Miscellany of mainly medical texts from Norwich.

I loue and y dare nouȝt	(f. iiir)

Sey þe best or be stylle (f. iiiv)

Huntingdon Library EL 26.A.13 (formerly Ellesmere 4) (15C)
Anthology of English poetry, including Chaucer and Lydgate, with additions by John Shirley

Tyed with a line	(f. 2v)
A wicked tunge wille sey amys	(ff. 20r-22r)

Cambridge University Library MS Ff.I.6 (The Findern Manuscript) (15C)
Literary miscellany owned by the Findern family from Derbyshire

A wicked tonge wille sey amys	(ff. 147r-149v)
Ther is nomor dredfull pestelens	(ff. 150r-151r)
Tyed with a line	(f. 151r)

BL Harley MS 2251 (c.1460-85)
Literary miscellany produced by the 'Hammond scribe', using manuscript exemplars compiled by John Shirley, and with similarities to BL Additional MS 34360. Owned by John Vale when he was secretary to the draper and mayor of London, Sir Thomas Cook, in 1462-3.[1] Contains a mixture of religious and literary material, with an emphasis upon Marian devotion and Lydgate's poems.

Consulo quisquis eris	(ff. 11v-13r)
Ryme without accord	(ff. 26r-27r)
Tyed with a lyne	(ff. 37v-39v)
A wicked tunge wille sey amys	(ff. 151r-152v)

BL Harley MS 2255 (15C)
Anthology of Lydgate's poetry produced for William Curteys, abbot at the Benedictine house of Bury St Edmunds.

Consulo quisquis eris	(ff. 1r-3r)
The world is variable	(ff. 126v-128r)
The cok hath lowe shoone	(ff. 131v-135r)

BL Additional MS 29729 (1558)
Partial copy of a lost Shirley codex and Trinity College, Cambridge, R.3.20, and similar to BL Additional MS 16165. Compiled by John Stow. Contains poetry by Chaucer, Hoccleve and Lydgate, as well as other poetry in French, Latin and English.

A leson to kepe well þe tonge	(ff. 6v-7r)
See myche, say lytell, and lerne to soffar in tyme	(ff. 130r-v)
Tyed with a lyne	(ff. 131v-132r)
A wicked tunge wille sey amys	(ff. 149v-151v)

NLS Advocates MS 1.1.6 (Bannatyne manuscript) (1568)
Literary anthology copied in Edinburgh by George Bannatyne.

Fals titlaris now grow vp full rank	(ff. 67v-68v)
Ryme without accord	(ff. 79r-v)
Say weill is trewly ane wirthy gud thing	(ff. 83r-v)
To gyd thy tung	(f. 83v)

[1] Connelly, *John Shirley*, p. 182.

Appendix 3
Cases of seditious speech

The following list of eighteen King's Bench indictments for seditious speech reproduces collectively those cases cited by the following historians in their studies of mid-fifteenth century politics: R. F. Hunnisett, 'Treason by Words', *Sussex Notes and Queries* 14 (1954-57), 116-120; Robin L. Storey, *The End of the House of Lancaster*, (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1966); Margaret Aston, 'A Kent Approver of 1440', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 36 (1963), 82-90; J. G. Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in the Later Middle Ages*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Bertram Wolffe, *Henry VI*, (London: Methuen, 1983); I. M. W. Harvey, *Jack Cade's Revolt of 1450*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Mavis Mate, 'The Economic and Social Roots of Medieval Popular Rebellion: Sussex in 1450-1451', *Economic History Review* 45 (1992), 661-76.

A full survey of the King's Bench records in the National Archives was not possible for this project, but it is anticipated that a thorough investigation of the KB9 (ancient indictments), KB27 (plea rolls), and KB29 (controlment rolls) files might reveal more cases than have previously been observed in partial histories on this subject. The list provided here gives a basic outline of the kinds of allegations that were considered seditious in the period. Each case is listed according to the principal allegations recorded, with the year and place where the indictment was made, and the name, status and occupation of the speaker, if known.

KB27/715 rex side m.19 (1440, Kent)
Robert Goodgrome, mole catcher (approver against various individuals)

- Complained of the economic burden of the ongoing war with France and the price of corn
- Proposed to kill the king, the Duke of Gloucester, and the Duke of Norfolk by necromancy

(Storey, *House of Lancaster*, pp. 199-209; Aston, 'A Kent Approver of 1440', pp. 82-90)

KB9/237 m.23 (1441, Chichester, Sussex)
Robert Seman, tanner

- Henry was not fit to be king
- Henry should be removed from the throne

(Hunnisett, 'Treason by Words', 118)

KB27/742 m.7 (1442, Farningham, Kent)
Yeoman

- The king was a lunatic, like his father

(Storey, *House of Lancaster*, p. 34)

KB9/245 m.47 (1444, Berkshire)

Thomas Carver, gentleman

- Developed a court sermon on the theme 'Woe to a kingdom when a child is king' to imply that the dauphin would be a better king than Henry
- Stated that it would have been worth £100,000 to the realm if Henry had been dead for the past twenty years, and later added that it would have been worth the same amount if he had never been born.

(Storey, *House of Lancaster*, p.34; Wolffe, *Henry VI*, p. 17; Bellamy, *Treason*, p. 118)

KB9/260 m.9, 85, 92 (1446, Suffolk)

John Page, draper

- The Duke of Suffolk and Bishop Aiscough lead the king and prevent him from having an heir
- The king has a child's face
- The king is not steadfast of wit
- The king is responsible for losing what his forebears gained
- Charged the commons to rise and destroy him and his counsel

(Wolffe, *Henry VI*, p. 17; Harvey, *Jack Cade's Revolt*, p. 32)

KB9/966 m.55, KB27/745 rex side m.6d (1446, London)

Thomas Pyttes, gentleman

- The king ignores the counsel of the lords and is ruled by the Duke of Suffolk and the Bishop of Salisbury
- The king has lost all that his forbears gained

(Storey, *House of Lancaster*, p. 48)

KB9/256 m.12 (1447, Gloucestershire)

Henry Colman, yeoman, keeper of Guildford castle

- Henry is responsible for Gloucester's death
- Gloucester would have been a better king than Henry, and should have killed the king and queen

John Bosgrove, keeper of Guildford gaol

- Wished the king and queen drowned
- All the realm's troubles began in 1445 when the queen arrived

(Wolffe, *Henry VI*, p. 17)

KB9/260 m.1 (1448, Lincolnshire)

William Westall, bowyer

- The king is grasping

(Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 31)

KB9/260 m.87 (1448, Middlesex)

William Parker

- A pity that Henry was king because he does not undertake any foreign wars
- Henry permits lawlessness in the kingdom

(Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 31)

KB9/262 m.78 (1449, Cley, Norfolk)
Husbandmen
- The king is a fool

(Storey, *House of Lancaster*, p. 35)

KB9/262 mm.1, 2 (1449, Ely, Cambridgeshire)
Harry Mase, Dutchman
- The king would be dead within fourteen days after All Hallows
- The king looks like a child
- A sheep would be a better emblem on the noble than a ship
- The tax on aliens isn't fair
- Had christened his fighting cocks Henry of England and Philip of Burgundy and applauded the latter's victory

(Wolffe, *Henry VI*, p. 17)

KB27/760 rex side m.3 (1449, Suffolk)
(Unidentified speaker)
- The king is better off dead

(Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 32)

KB9/122 m.28 (1450, Brightling, Sussex)
John and William Merfeld, husbandmen
- The king is a fool
- The realm needs a new king
- The pardon granted after Cade's rebellion is false
- The Sussex fellowship will rise again and leave only those gentleman alive that they wish to have

(Hunnisett, 'Treason by Words', p. 120; Mate, 'Economic and Social Roots', pp. 661-76)

KB9/263 m.64, KB27/755 rex side m.3 (1450, Kent)
Nicholas Jakes
- Alleged that he had planned to behead the bishop of Salisbury, Lords Saye and Dudley, and the abbot of Gloucester
- Alleged that he had planned to take over the government

(Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 66)

KB29/81 Hilary term m.12 (1450, London)
William Raulyns, woolpacker and soldier
- Unspecified treasonable words against the king

(Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 68)

KB9/73 m.1 and rest of file (1450, London)
John Ramsey or Frammesley, vintner
- Henry would lose his crown

(Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 70; Storey, *House of Lancaster*, p. 62)

KB9/122 m.40 (1450, Kent)
Butcher
- Would like to shoot the king down like a buck

(Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 134)

KB9/273 m.103 (1453, Southwark)
Michael Skellys, leech
- The captain of Kent should have reigned
- Might as well have a sheep instead of a king
- Propose to replace Cade's head on London bridge with that of John Kemp, chancellor and archbishop of London, and the dukes of Somerset and Buckingham
- Also stole one of the king's cloaks with the intention to kill the king by necromancy

(Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 168)

In addition to the cases cited above, the following cases were used as precedents in the evaluation of Pine's case in 1628. If the original King's Bench records are extant, they are not cited by any current historians in their accounts of seditious speech. Overviews of the cases are given in *A Selection of Cases from the State Trials*, ed. J. W. Willis Bund, vol. 1 (1327-1660), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1879), pp. 440-2. See also *State Trials*, vol. III, (London: T. C. Hansard, 1809).

Juliana Quick (1443)
- Henry will be responsible for Gloucester's death, as he is responsible for his mother's death
- Henry should restore Gloucester's wife
- Henry is a fool

John Clepsham (1451)
- The King is unable to govern the kingdom

William Bretenham (1453)
- Richard, Duke of York should be king

William Ashton (1453)
- The king's uncle, the King of France, reigned over both kingdoms
- Urged the commons of Kent to rise and aid the Duke of York

- Circulated ballads and writings which stated that the Duke of Suffolk, the Bishops of Salisbury and Chester, Lord Grey, and other members of the Council, had advised the king to sell the kingdoms of England and France

The only case of seditious speech that I have discovered in an archive outside of the King's Bench records is contained in the Chartae Antiquae of Canterbury Cathedral Archives. A transcription of the case is provided in *Literae Cantuarienses*, vol. III, ed. J. Brigstocke Sheppard, (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1889), pp. 195-7.

CCA DCc-ChAnt/C/239 (1448, Monkton, Kent)
John Andrew, labourer, and Thomas Grene, labourer

- The king is inadequate to bear the flourdelys or the ship on the noble
- The Queen should not be queen because she does not bear a child

Appendix 4
Cases of seditious speech grouped by type

The table below groups the eighteen King's Bench indictments listed in Appendix 3 according to the allegations made to show the frequency with which particular political issues were raised in cases of seditious speech.

Allegation	Case	Year	Location
The king should be deposed/ killed	KB27/715 rex side m.19	1440	Kent
	KB9/237 m.23	1441	Sussex
	KB9/245 m.46	1444	Berkshire
	KB9/260 m.85	1446	Suffolk
	KB9/256 m.12	1447	Gloucestershire
	KB9/252 mm.1,2	1449	Cambridgeshire
	KB27/760 rex side m.3	1449	Suffolk
	KB9/122 m.28	1450	Sussex
	KB9/73 m.1	1450	London
	KB9/122 m.40	1450	Kent
	KB9/273 m.103	1453	Southwark
Henry is mad/ unfit to be king	KB9/237 m.23	1441	Sussex
	KB27/742 rex side m.7	1442	Kent
	KB9/260 m.85	1446	Suffolk
	KB9/262 m.78	1449	Norfolk
	KB9/122 m.28	1450	Sussex
French war	KB9/245 m.46	1444	Berkshire
	KB9/260 m.85	1446	Suffolk
	KB9/262 mm.1,2	1449	Cambridgeshire
	KB9/273 m.103	1453	Southwark
Councillors	KB9/260 m.85	1446	Suffolk
	KB9/966 m.55	1446	London
	KB27/755 rex side m.3	1450	Kent
	KB9/273 m.103	1453	Southwark
Finances	KB9/260 m.85	1446	Suffolk
	KB9/966 m.55	1446	London
	KB9/260 m.1	1448	Lincolnshire
	KB9/262 mm.1,2	1449	Cambridgeshire
Henry is like a child	KB9/260 m.85	1446	Suffolk
	KB9/262 mm.1,2	1449	Cambridgeshire
Henry is a sheep	KB9/262 mm.1,2	1449	Cambridgeshire
	KB9/273 m.103	1453	Southwark
Cade	KB9/122 m.28	1450	Sussex
	KB9/273 m.103	1453	Southwark
Henry does not challenge lawlessness	KB9/260 m.87	1448	Middlesex
Margaret of Anjou	KB9/256 m.12	1447	Gloucestershire
Duke of Gloucester	KB9/256 m.12	1447	Gloucestershire

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