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Inscriptions in British Literature: From Runes to the Rise of Public Poetry

From the retreat of the Roman Empire until the rise of the Tudors, medieval Britain's landscape was a veritable palimpsest on which successive conquerors sought to leave their marks. The topic of inscriptionality and the inscribed material object requires the scholar of medieval British literature to make both cultural and temporal distinctions. Anglo-Saxon poetry reminds us that the Britain encountered by the tribes migrating from northwest Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark in the fifth to the seventh centuries was littered with traces of earlier cultures: both the mythical, the race of "giants" whose monuments they viewed in Stonehenge, and the historical, the Latinised Celts pushed from their Roman centres to the fringes of the island. A few centuries later, the Anglo-Saxon society that had begun to coalesce into an "English" culture through the literary labours of the Church and monarchs such as King Alfred the Great (849–899) was disrupted by another military incursion from the Continent. The linguistic and literary shifts precipitated by the Norman invasion in 1066 would take another two centuries of a distinct Anglo-Norman ruling class to resolve into the Middle English tradition familiar to readers of Chaucer or Malory. Since the different periods of literary history in medieval England discourage a strictly chronological account, this chapter is divided into three thematic sections: writing artefacts and cultural difference; public and private forms of texts; and inscriptionality in the rise of an "English" literary tradition. Consequently, even as Anglo-Saxon texts will, of necessity, feature more prominently in our discussion of cultural difference, and late Middle English ones in our account of the literary tradition that emerges in the period, each section will develop a thematic argument with reference to texts from multiple periods.¹

1 Writing Artefacts and Cultural Difference

The unifying factor in the three linguistically defined periods of medieval British literary history—Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Norman and Middle English—is Latin Christianity. Its introduction to the Anglo-Saxons through missionary endeavours from Rome in

¹ A preliminary note to our translations and choice of editions: All translations are our own unless otherwise indicated. They will be cited with line numbers in parenthesis in the body of the text. For the Middle English texts, we have chosen to use primarily editions from the TEAMS Middle English Text Series. These online scholarly editions are readily accessible to an international audience through the Robbins Digital Library Project at the University of Rochester, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams> (last accessed: 30.05.2019).

the sixth century brought with it the Roman alphabet and a literary corpus to inspire the Anglo-Saxon literary imagination. In the emerging monasteries where the art of writing flourished, Anglo-Saxon monks, however, also continued to remember and transmit their pagan Germanic inheritance in the form of orally circulated stories and a distinct script consisting of carved runes. These two cultural systems, Latin Christianity and Germanic paganism, both left their mark on Old English and Anglo-Latin texts as well as on Anglo-Saxon scribal culture, which was practiced and imagined in two ways: writing in ink and carving with knives, script on vellum and on stone/wood/metal, the lettered book and the rune-inscribed object.

In the literature of early medieval Britain, material inscriptions are intricately tied to Christian ritual time and space. Two of the Old English riddles of the Exeter Book, short enigmatic poems that challenge the reader to guess the described object, illustrate how text-bearing artefacts used as ritual props invite the participation of all those who read their words. Riddle 48 and 59 may both be interpreted to imagine a chalice that is passed around “to men” (*hæpelum*, 48:1, 59:17) “in the hall” (*in healle*, 59:17), the gathering place for an Anglo-Saxon community. However, the chalices are not only imagined as object-media that recall and reiterate Christ’s Last Supper for the participants in communion. They are text-bearing agents whose voices actively engage the believers.

The inscriptions on the chalices are conceptualised as speech, rather than writing.² In Riddle 48, the chalice “spoke with powerful words: ‘Heal me, helping saviour’” (*strongum wordum [...] cwæð: “Gehæle mec, helpend gæsta”*, 48:3f.). The inscription, the chalice’s speech, is quoted directly here, in contrast to Riddle 59, in which the inscribed object only “spoke a word” (*word [...] æfter cwæð*, 59:5): it “named the Redeemer” (*hælend nemde*, 59:6). While the chalices are presented as eloquent, they are, oxymoronically, also “without tongue” (*butan tungan*, 48:2), “silent” (*swigende*, 48:4) and “dumb” (*dumba*, 8).³ Their speech, however, may be perceived by men’s “eyesight” (*eagna gesihð*, 59:9). With this interweaving of the auditory and visual senses, the two riddles pointedly express the paradox of text-bearing and voice-endowed, yet inanimate artefacts.

Given the silence of the lifeless object, it is its materiality that lends it a voice. While the believers hear and read “the speech of the gold” (*readan goldes*, 48:6), they may interpret the first person of *Gehæle mec* as either their own voice, the chalice’s, or both. Riddle 59 even specifies that it is not the ritual drinking vessel that is speaking, but “the wounds of the chalice” (*wunda [...] hringes*, 59:16f.). This phrase both recalls the incisions the engraver would have had to make in the metal to form the letters of the inscription and evokes Christ’s stigmata. The inanimate gold of the chalice and the organic flesh of Jesus’s incarnation overlap, two materials both naturally silent, but meaningful when engraved.

² See Ramey 2013, 335–337.

³ Zweck 2016 explores the paradoxes of speech and silence in the Exeter Book Riddles.

Such a blending of multiple images is characteristic of the enigmatic speech in the Exeter Book Riddles. These two examples demonstrate how inscriptions oscillate between orality and writing. The text-bearing chalices exemplify a hallmark of Christian thinking, namely the permanence of a holy tradition and the immediacy of a ritual shared by a group of believers. In addition, the inscribed objects invite continuous interaction: the chalices are to be handled, “revolved and turned” (*wylted ond wended*, 59:18), to be listened to, to be read, to be understood in their spiritual meaning, and finally to be discovered by the reader of the riddles, whose presence merges with the texts’ notion of transcendence.

In addition to Latin scripturality as an acquired tradition to be cultivated, medieval British literature also negotiated the remnants and meanings of a pagan inheritance. Pre-Christian Germanic cultures not only told and retold their own set of mytho-historical narratives, but bequeathed to Anglo-Saxon England a specific writing system, carved runes whose angular shape made them particularly suitable for inscriptions in stone and wood. While the earliest runic writings predate the conversion of Germanic regions, they continued to be used alongside the Roman alphabet for both public commemoration and everyday purposes such as name-tagging and calendars.⁴

A number of archaeological findings from Anglo-Saxon England demonstrate that inscriptions in different scripts even existed side by side on the same object. The Franks Casket, for instance, a whale’s bone box of Northumbrian origin dating from the eighth century, presents such an intriguing mélange. On each panel, a central image depicting human and animal figures from Germanic mythology or Romano-Christian history is framed by an inscription that runs along the edges of the casket. While most of the text is written in Old English with runic letters, the rear panel contains a short passage in Latin written with Roman letters and another Latin word transcribed in runes.⁵ In a similar fashion, the monumental Ruthwell Cross (Northumbria, eighth century) preserves script in both Latin, spelled with the Roman alphabet, and Old English, engraved in runes.

In addition to such elaborate bilingual monuments, smaller Northumbrian name stones show that biscripturality might have been more ubiquitous than the isolated findings of the Franks Casket and the Ruthwell Cross suggest. Discovered at monastic sites such as Lindisfarne and Hartlepool, the name stones are rectangular slabs sized between 19 and 42 cm in height inscribed with a personal name arranged around a cross. Some stones even bear the names of two persons, one in Roman capitals and

⁴ See Symons 2016, 3–10 for the uses of the runic letters in Anglo-Saxon England. For the runes as speech see also Katja Schulz’s chapter on Old Norse in this volume.

⁵ Strictly speaking, the set of letters used to record vernacular writings in Anglo-Saxon England was a modified Roman alphabet that included additional characters to represent sounds specific to Old English, such as æ, ð and þ. Our use of the term *Latin alphabet* in this chapter refers to this Anglo-Saxonsised set of Roman letters.

one in runic script. While scholars agree that the function of the name stones was likely commemorative, their script-mixing is a matter of debate. They might have been addressed to a readership familiar with both alphabets or might commemorate persons who took on a different name once they entered religious life.⁶

Not only archaeological objects of whale's bone and stone, but also literary texts from Anglo-Saxon Britain at times present their readers with a puzzling juxtaposition of different scripts. The Old English elegy *The Husband's Message*, for example, consists of 54 alliterative verses with five runic symbols embedded in the last lines of the text. The elegy imagines how a displaced man sends an inscribed piece of wood as a letter to his lover at home, asking her to join him in his new homeland where he has come to prosper. While the exiled nobleman (*se þeoden*, 29) is clearly identified as the sender of the message and the "prince's daughter" (*þeodnes dohter*, 48) as his addressee, it is less obvious who is the first-person narrator opening the text with "now I will tell you in private" (*Nu ic onsuntran þe secgan wille*, 1). This speaker, who later refers to "the one who engraved this piece of wood" (*se pisne beam agrof*, 13), might be a messenger entrusted to relay the wooden letter, who then gives an additional oral report on the exiled man abroad.⁷ Other readings, in contrast, maintain that it is the piece of wood itself that pronounces its own inscription. This thingly speaker has been identified with a personified rune-stick, a writing tablet or even the engraved mast of a ship.⁸ For the purpose of this study, we merely assume the text refers to an inscribed piece of wood of indeterminate shape that is mobile enough to reach its intended reader.

Throughout this text, the prosopopoeic "I" is urgently concerned with establishing trust. It mentions the man's "gloriously steadfast faithfulness" (*tirfæste treowe*, 12) and the "spoken vows" (*wordbeotunga*, 15) the pair had exchanged in former times in an attempt to convince the woman of her exiled lover's improved state and to hasten her to set sail at once. As doing so would be risky, the inscription makes a final assurance at the very end of the text. After several references to oral information and oral instructions (*secgan*, 1; *gehatan*, 11; *Heht*, 20; *sægde*, 31; *wære*, 52), the speaker concludes his message with visual symbols that need to be read to be understood:

*Ofer eald gebeot incer twega
ge[h]lyre ic ætsomne Ȑ . R geador,
T . P ond M aþe beneman
þæt he þa wære ond þa winetreowe
be him lifgendum læstan wolde
þe git on ærdagum oft gespræconn.*
(49–54)

According to an old vow between the two of you,
I hear S . R, EA . W and M
declare together by oath
that he would keep the vow and the pledge of
friendship
as long as he lives,
which you two had often pronounced in the past.

⁶ See Clements 2017, 23 with further literature. She argues for a reading of the name stones as pages of a manuscript. Cf. also Maddern 2013, 1–51 for an introduction to Anglo-Saxon name stones.

⁷ See Greenfield 1966, 170.

⁸ See respectively Page 1999, 101f.; Symons 2016, 75; Niles 2003, 203.

Much scholarly ink has been spilt over how to interpret the runic characters. Bragg argues that Anglo-Saxon readers would have read them as “bookish alphabet play” (39) that draws on the contemporary monastic use of runes as cryptographic symbols to be deciphered by the knowing. She maintains that taken together, the runes “spell a word” (38), but does not say which word would be plausible.⁹ Other readings have taken the name-values of the runes and transcribed them as “heaven” (*sigelrad*), “earth” (*earwyn*), and “man” (*mon*), the elements invoked to ensure that a vow would be effective.¹⁰ Niles, using the same decoding method, advocates a different reading,¹¹ but also offers an interpretation of the effect that the runic characters might have had on their readers. *The Husband’s Message* employs a strategy he calls “runification”,¹² which serves to give the text an air of mystery and renders it “more antique”.¹³ However, he also claims the special runic characters serve as a comforting sign to the woman that her lover’s message is true, which raises the question how something that mystifies and defamiliarises can also be reassuring.

As a text written on a vellum page, *The Husband’s Message* in its last lines does not simply present glimpses of a divergent script. The inserted runes draw attention to more than the practice of writing as a means for private communication.¹⁴ They also evoke a different writing material, more recalcitrant and less processed than parchment, into which linguistic signs had to be cut with force. This material is highlighted at the very beginning of the text. The speaker opens its monologue by informing us that “I grew from a shoot” (*ic tudre awox*, 2) and refers to “a kind of tree” (*treocyn*, 2) that the piece of wood might have originated from.¹⁵ We are presented not only with a speaking, text-bearing object, but with an organic substance that is self-aware to the point of autobiographical narration. As Zweck has argued, the piece of wood is a “hypermedium” that compells the reader to face its materiality along with its message.¹⁶

As medieval communicative practice closely connects the qualities of the representative intermediary with the absent sender, a mobile inscription that foregrounds its own materiality adds credibility to a distant exile. The vocabulary of trust and the runic script are not the only reassuring elements. These special, epigraphic characters are inscribed onto an object made of wood, a rare writing material in later Anglo-Saxon England, which preferred parchment. The text presents a message that

⁹ Bragg 1999.

¹⁰ See Klinck 1992, 208.

¹¹ Niles 2003, 207–211, translating Ȑ R as “the open sea” and Ȑ P ond M “a happy wife and man”.

¹² Niles 2003, 194.

¹³ Niles 2003, 196. Cf. also Foys 2012, 144–146, who reads the runes in the context of media studies.

¹⁴ See Symons 2016, 4 and 80.

¹⁵ Klinck 1992, 57f. offers possible alternatives for the identity of the speaker, which depends on the reconstructions of these lines at the beginning of the poem, where the manuscript is badly burnt.

¹⁶ Cf. Zweck 2018, 18. Describing the same phenomenon with different terminology, Page 1999, 169 calls inscriptions that refer to their own form or materiality “self-evident”.

is encoded, arcane, personal, private, yet emphatically material, which turns its extraordinary xyloglyphs into a powerful stand-in for the absent, signifying lover.

Nowhere in *The Husband's Message* do we learn how the lady reacted to reading the letter and its cryptic runes. It is impossible to guess whether she would have interpreted them as the unique signature of her beloved or been left puzzling at their archaic appearance. In the epic *Beowulf*, in contrast, a sword hilt engraved with strange written symbols presented to King Hrothgar has provoked a number of scholarly debates regarding the King's literacy, his capacity to interpret the writing, and even the precise language and script of the inscription. Recovered by the poem's eponymous hero from the underwater cave of a monster-mother he had just slain, the inscribed sword hilt is both an obvious trophy and an unintelligible relic. It provides an interesting starting point to explore epigraphic readability and the reader-response theory of inscriptions scrutinised by both fictional characters and scholars.

The hilt enters the story as follows: Beowulf has followed the monster Grendel and his mother to their submerged lair. When he engages the mother in combat, his sword fails to do damage. Fortunately, he spots an “old sword of giants” (*ealdsweord eotenisc*, 1558) mounted on the wall of the cave, grabs it, kills the monster-mother and beheads her son. Drenched in their poisonous blood, the blade of the sword melts way (*gemealt*, 1608), leaving Beowulf with only the hilt, which he takes back to the surface along with Grendel's head. During the ensuing victory celebration, the triumphant hero presents the *gylden hilt* (1677) to King Hrothgar, whose hall the monsters had been haunting. Even though the narrator announces that “Hrothgar spoke” (*Hrōðgār maðelode*, 1687), the text does not go on to quote the King. Instead, the narrator allows the audience to view the hilt through Hrothgar's eyes. Hrothgar

hylt scēawode
ealde lāfe, on ðām wæs ōr writen
fyrngewinnes syðban flōd ofslōh
gifen gēotende gīganta cyn.
 (1687-1690)

examined the hilt
 of this relic of old times. On it was engraved
 the origin of ancient strife, when the flood
 destroyed
 with rushing seas the race of giants.

Furthermore, the hilt also records for whom the sword had first been made “with runic letters correctly incised” (*þurh rūnstafas rihte gemearcod*, 1695). Only after this ekphrasis by the narrator does Hrothgar give his anticipated speech, an exposition on the many challenges of good kingship whose relationship to the narrative born by the “old heirloom” (*ealde lāfe*, 1688) has puzzled generations of readers.

Is “Hrothgar's Sermon”, as the speech is commonly called, a sign that he has grasped the hilt's message or an indication that the script is illegible to him? Some suggest he does not succeed in deciphering the text: the King merely looks (*scēawode*, 1687) at the hilt, but there is no mention of him reading the inscription; his subsequent speech proves that he did not understand a word written on the hilt, otherwise

he would have made some reference to it in his “Sermon”.¹⁷ However, the text’s equivocality allows very divergent readings. Lerer, for example, argues that Hrothgar’s lecture on the transience of power in fact shows that he read and processed the meaning behind the tale of the end of the giants, although he does not explicitly refer to the inscription.¹⁸ Even as we know Hrothgar looks at the hilt, audiences ultimately remain unsure of what he perceives.

The exact design of the hilt also continues to pose a riddle to scholars. It is marked with meaningful symbols from which the narrator infers two things: the hilt tells the story of how a race of giants perished in a deluge sent by a vengeful God and it identifies the original owner of the sword. The latter information is engraved *þurh rūnstafas*, which may mean either “with letters” in general or “with runes” in particular.¹⁹ While this phrase refers to linguistic symbols of some sort, the story of the giants is simply *written* on the hilt. The ambiguity of this passage has prompted a number of attempts to guess at the language and script with which the hilt was inscribed. Frantzen, for example, works with a narrow understanding of *rūnstafas* and assumes the inscription is made with (secret) runes.²⁰ Schrader, in contrast, contends that the hilt was inscribed with a Hebrew text since this is the language that was presumed to be spoken in the period between the Noachian flood and the Babylonian confusion.²¹ *Beowulf*, then, demonstrates that one instance of writing in an otherwise preliterate fictional world increases ambiguity more than it secures meaning.

Hrothgar’s (il)literacy and hermeneutic (in)abilities along with the inscription’s linguistic indeterminacy also influence how the poem’s audience interprets the role of the text-bearing artefact. If the King’s speech is indeed prompted by the words on the hilt, the inscribed object can function as a “historic provocation”,²² a reified reminder of *vanitas* and a caveat that even triumphs like Beowulf’s are never permanent. If, in contrast, the poem’s characters can only appreciate the surface of the incised hilt without comprehending the meaning of the inscription, the passage raises “a concern over how stories of the present are conveyed to future audiences and, specifically, how histories may be transformed by the kinds of artefacts that carry them”.²³ It makes the reader of *Beowulf* wonder whether the poem itself might not be very similar to the fictional inscription: both chronicle the eventual downfall of once mighty protagonists, challenging audiences to imagine the possible outcomes of their own acts of reception.²⁴ In a sense, the inscribed artefact has become pure text. While the

¹⁷ See Paz 2013, 247.

¹⁸ Lerer 1991, 171–174.

¹⁹ Bosworth-Toller, s. v. *run-stæf*, <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/026047> (last accessed: 30.05.2019).

²⁰ Frantzen 1991, 344.

²¹ Schrader 1993, 142–146.

²² Johnston 2016, 212.

²³ Paz 2013, 249.

²⁴ See Paz 2013, 243, who explicitly likens Beowulf to the giants.

gold-inlaid hilt endured, the iron blade melted, rendering the object useless as a weapon. While no more heroic deeds can be done with the mere sword-fragment, its indeterminate script still has agency in that it affects both Hrothgar and the poem's audiences, who understand themselves to be as removed from the poem's historical setting as Hrothgar is from the giants.

As scholarly attempts to decipher the sword hilt in *Beowulf* illustrate, the English literary imagination contained a sense of alternate alphabets whose alienness, while mystifying, did not preclude the message's pertinence to future generations, even to other peoples.²⁵ Consequently, the unresolvable riddle posed by an illegible inscription could cast the inscribed object as *unheimlich*. The preface to the late fourteenth-century alliterative poem, *St Erkenwald*, for instance, imagines Anglo-Saxon Britain as a pagan landscape forcefully overwritten by Augustine of Kent, who has pagan idols recast as saints (cf. 17–20). Augustine's renaming of sacred architecture anticipates the central conflict of the poem, the return of the repressed, in the discomfiting discovery of a mysterious tomb and its well-preserved occupant in the heart of St Paul's Cathedral in London. The poem dwells at length on the first unsettling feature of this marvel: no one can read the beautifully engraved golden letters on the elegant tomb.

& *Pe bordure enbelicit wyt bryȝt golde
lettres;*
*But roynyshe were pe resones pat per on
row stoden.*
*Fulle verray were pe vigures, per auisyde
hom mony,*
*Bot alle muset hit to mouthe & quat hit
mene shulde;*
*Mony clerke in pat clos, with crownes ful
brode,*
*Per besiet hom a-boute noȝt, to brynge
hom in wordes.*

(51–56)

And the border is embellished with bright gold
letters;
But mysterious were the words that stood there
in a row.
The letters were very clear, that many [observers]
noted,
But all pondered how to pronounce [the words]
and what it [the text] meant;
Many clerks with shaved crowns in that place
Busied themselves without success to translate
the words.

The possible etymological link between the Old Norse *rūn* and the Middle English *roynyshe*, denoting “mysterious, strange”, illustrates the metamorphosis of the ubiquitous into the esoteric that informs Niles's concept of “runification”. Setting aside the etymological debate, we can conclude that Middle English literature inherited the Anglo-Saxon *literati*'s perception of runes as what E. J. Christie terms, “a semiotic principle of secrecy”.²⁶

²⁵ See Christie 2011 on the Anglo-Saxon fascination with alphabets and secret letters.

²⁶ In the explanatory notes to his EETS edition of the poem, Gollancz observes that the connection between this OE and ME term for “mystery” with the Old Norse *rūn* is “difficult, though attractive”. See Christie 2011, 148.

If the insertion of runes in *The Husband's Message* signalled the use of divergent writing practices as a means of private communication, we see that the course of history can also transform an inscribed object's commemorative public address into arcane knowledge accessible only to the educated elite. In the case of *St Erkenwald*, the object demands a miraculous intervention to give up its meaning, as even seven days of searching St Paul's library yield no answers (155–158). Strikingly, St Erkenwald's intercession overlooks the puzzling inscription altogether; instead he revives and interviews the righteous pagan judge directly. The detailed ekphrastic attention the poem dedicates to sketching out the visual elegance of the tomb and its inhabitant gives way in the second half of the poem to dialogue between the saint and the virtuous pagan, leaving the initial marvel, the untranslatable epitaph, as an unresolved remainder.

To recognise the inscribed object as "in excess" draws attention to the degree to which the poem itself portrays materiality as both seductive and misleading. The shining gold letters inscribed on the tomb's border anticipate the tomb's interior *al with golde payntyde* (75), as well as the *glisnande* ("glistening") golden hem of the judge's gown (78), and his *gurdille* ("girdle") of *golde* (79). The judge's magnificent clothes and coffin contribute to the people's initial misreading of the mysterious corpse as that of a king. Later the undead judge explicitly explains that he had no control over the fact that his body was *buriet* ("buried") *in golde* (225–226, 248). Materially associated with this sartorial misdirection, the gold inscription itself becomes untrustworthy, representing the written letter as potentially deceptive, much like the motif of the false grave found in classical and Continental romances of the British corpus, such as *Apollonius of Tyre* (eleventh century) and *Floris and Blancheflour* (c. 1250).

St Erkenwald's mysterious inscription stands in stark contrast to a contemporaneous popular legend of the virtuous pre-Christian pagan then circulating in the travel narrative, *The Book of John Mandeville* (c. 1357–1366). The author recounts his visit to the Church of Saint Sophia in Constantinople and a tale of its sepulchral marvel (227–234). When the emperor buries his father he discovers another grave covered with a great plate of gold: *And theruppon was i-writen in Ebru* ("Hebrew"), *Gru* ("Greek"), and *Latyn thus: Jhesu Cristus nascetur de Virgine Maria et ego credo in eum*. *That is to say: "Jhesu Crist shal be bore of the Virgyn Mari and I belyve on Hym"*. Mandeville explains that the source of this confession of faith two thousand years before Christ comes from none other than Hermogenes the Wise. Here the lapidary characteristics and incorruptibility of the gold plate, functioning as a written record of an otherwise ephemeral oral confession of faith, allow the righteous pagan to correct future misinterpretations, both divine and mundane, of his proper place in Christian teleology.

The attribution of this legend to Hermes the Wise, also known as Hermes Trismegistus (the purported author of the Hermetic corpus in the medieval imagination), gestures to the association of the inscribed object not with a holy time or ritual space, but with Eastern esoteric learning. Such an association may even haunt *St Erkenwald* in the poem's reference to the people's perplexity at the *quontyse strange* (74) just

before the tomb is opened to reveal its golden interior and elaborately costumed inhabitant. The modern English translation of this phrase as “strange marvel” misses the complexity of the term *queintise*, which in Middle English can also denote both “elaborate clothing or ornament” as well as “magic”.²⁷

The historical association of the inscribed object with magical practice traces its roots back to antiquity. The introduction of Latin Christianity to Britain inevitably produced “charms” that sought to harness the miraculous power of the Church for domestic and military ends.²⁸ In everyday practice such charms were carved into food-stuffs (apples, bread, cheese, wafers) that could be consumed, as well as wood, wax and other materials used as portable amulets and talismans. In English literary narratives, however, the predominant object whose inscription lends it preternatural powers is the weapon. In the late Anglo-Saxon poem *Solomon and Saturn*—immediately following a brilliant passage in which animated letters of the alphabet fight the devil (84–145)—the written word is literally weaponised as Solomon invokes a doomed man with a “bewitched blade” (*bill forscriffeð*) on which diabolical forces have written “baleful letters” (*bealwe bocstafas*, 168). The same principle applies in a benevolent form when King Richard wields a spear inscribed with the name of God (5719–5720) while fighting the Saracens in the late medieval romance *Richard Coer de Lyon*. Here we encounter a fictional instance of actual historical practices among crusaders, who inscribed Christ’s name or other divine names on swords and shields for additional protection against the perils they would encounter.²⁹

In a literary context, the miraculously empowered inscribed weapon also works to cast the military foe as demonic force with malevolent magical powers of its own, reinforcing the crusading notion that military combat was also spiritual warfare. In the case of the crusader romance, the demon steeds conjured by the Sultan’s necromancer for the single combat between Saladin and Richard (5479–5547) participate in a long Western tradition of linking magical knowledge, and in particular magical writing, with the Orient and the cultural Others associated with it. Belief in the apotropaic function of the divine name, for instance, was part of both Christian and Jewish folk customs and esotericism, a fact not lost on medieval scholars interested in Solomonic magic. In fact, the magical pre-eminence granted by Christian thinkers to Hebrew as the primal language of Creation, even before the spread of pseudo-Solomonic grimoires in the twelfth century, is one reason why contemporary scholars can entertain the possibility that the “runification” of the sword hilt in *Beowulf* might have been

²⁷ *Queintise* (n. d.). In *Middle English Dictionary Online*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id= MED35510> (last accessed: 30.05.2019).

²⁸ See Skemer 2006.

²⁹ *Richard Coer de Lyon* is based on a lost Anglo-Norman original. There are seven manuscripts dating from the early fourteenth to the late fifteenth centuries. For more on weapon inscriptions see Skemer 2006, 108.

imagined by an Anglo-Saxon poet as what we might call a “Hebraicization”.³⁰ Over the course of the Middle Ages, Arabic scholarship was instrumental in transmitting Hellenistic and Jewish esoterica and was credited with advances in astrological knowledge passed on by Iberian scholars. By the late medieval period, the archetypal ritual magician who emerges in literature with his mysteriously inscribed instruments, magical seals and ritual objects draws on this Orientalist mystique.

The medieval English tradition illustrates this most dramatically with the figure of Nectanabus in its versions of the legend of Alexander the Great. The Auchinleck Manuscript’s *King Alisaunder* (1330) and John Gower’s version in *Confessio Amantis* (1390) both present the Egyptian magician using astrological knowledge and a wax effigy on which he inscribes the queen’s name to perform his magic. The prevalence of the inscribed object as a feature of imagined and actual occult rituals—where the linguistic obscurity of the inscription to the average reader attests to its arcane power—suggests that even as writing became more common in medieval England, the inscribed object’s ability to materialise invisible forces remains part of the cultural imagination.

Perhaps the best illustration of this point is the medieval English poetic depiction of Belshazzar’s Feast, a biblical scene of inscription from the Book of Daniel.³¹ The frequency of English literary depictions of the prophetic writing on the wall during a sacrilegious feast thrown by King Belshazzar (son of Nebuchadnezzar and the last king of Babylon) is striking. The scene appears first in the Old English poem *Daniel*, which imagines an angel’s hand writing in red ink on the wall, inscribing “crimson letters” (*baswe bocstafas*, 723) that mystify the King and the “city-dwellers” (*burhsittendas*, 723).³² However, the scene is also mentioned repeatedly in late medieval poems by major Middle English poets.³³ The most arresting depiction for scholars interested in inscriptionality occurs in *Cleanness*, one of the lesser known poems by the Pearl-poet responsible for the well-known Middle English poems *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*. In contrast to the vague references to “writing” made by Gower and Chaucer in their versions of the tale, *Cleanness*’s dramatic depiction of the mysterious hand engraving the prophecy into a wall emphasises the physical force required for such an inscription:

³⁰ For more on the subject see Smalley 1952, Janowitz 2002, and Kieckhefer 1989.

³¹ See Lucas 1994.

³² The Old English poem is found in the Junius manuscript (early tenth century). But its author and date of composition are unknown.

³³ See Gower *Confessio Amantis* 5,7017–7025; See Chaucer, Monk’s Tale 2203–2235, in *Canterbury Tales*.

*In þe palays pryncipale upon þe playn wowe,
 In contrary of þe candelstik þat clerest hit
 schyned,
 Per apered a paume, wþth poyntel in
 fyngres,
 þat watz grysl and gret, and grymly he
 wrytes;
 Non oper forme bot a fust faylante þe
 wryste,
 Pared on þe parget, purtrayed lettres. [...]
 Ay bisholdand þe honde til hit hade al graven,
 And rasped on þe roþ woþe runisch sauez.

 When hit þe scripture hade scraped wþth
 a scrof penne,
 As a coltor in clay cerves þo forþes,
 Penne hit vanist verayly and voyded of syȝt;
 Bot þe lettres bileved ful large upon plaster.*
 (1531–1536, 1544–1546, emphasis ours)

In the principal palace upon the bare wall,
 Over against the candlestick that shone the
 clearest,
 There appeared a hand with a stylus in its
 fingers,
 It was horrible and huge, and, terrifyingly, it
 wrote;
 No other form but a clenched hand cut off at the
 wrist,
 Cut into the plaster, penned letters. [...]
 Beholding the hand until it had engraved,
 And scratched on the rough wall, mysterious
 words.
 When, with a rough pen, it had scraped the text,
 As a coultor carves rows into clay,
 Then, truly, it vanished, disappeared from sight;
 But the letters remained, written large on the wall.

With verbs like *paren*, *raspen*, *graven*, *scrapen* and the rough (*scrof*) stylus, the poet's representation of engraving as a form of violence to the wall contributes to the scene's horror. Here, again, the "runish" words, clearly magical yet uninterpretable to pagan necromancers, require the expert reader, in this case the prophet Daniel. Moreover, the drama of the prophecy's application and its effect on the witnesses directs the audience's attention beyond the mere translation of what the "runish" words say. The poem's focus on the act of inscription evokes a further question, one raised more generally by inscriptions as physical artefacts and unique rhetorical acts in a pre-print environment: what kind of force had the power to effect the inscription and to whom is it addressed?

2 Public and Private

To inquire by whom and for whom an inscription is created requires us to consider the complex relationship between literary representation and historical practice when it comes to inscriptionality in medieval England. One case in point is civic epigraphy, a distinctly pre-medieval form of writing that English authors productively appropriated from the considerable corpus of Latin texts they had inherited from antiquity. The public spaces of ancient Rome and the poleis of classical Greece were marked by a plethora of material inscriptions, among them plaques or incised pedestals accompanying dedicatory statues to name the honoured individual, engraved stone slabs incorporated into buildings to identify them as temples or public bathhouses, recent decrees published on noticeboards, and a variety of graffiti ranging from the poetic to

the defamatory. The number of civic inscriptions that have come down to us from the Greco-Roman world leaves no doubt that the classical public space was text-bearing. Unsurprisingly, this pronounced “epigraphical habit” found its way into Latin and Greek literature as well.³⁴

Early medieval England, in contrast, did not develop an equally elaborate practice of writing in and for the civic sphere. Most of the surviving epigraphy from the Anglo-Saxon period was found on private objects and mainly indicated ownership. With the exception of ecclesiastical contexts and personal commemoration, public writing that was relevant to a larger citizen body is conspicuously absent from the extant collections.³⁵ Two main reasons may explain this lack of civic epigraphy in Anglo-Saxon England. First, it did not have urban structures of the size and density of Rome or Athens, where a large number of influential citizens who participated in the political and administrative life of the empire needed to be informed about important past and ongoing events. Second, and more importantly, Anglo-Saxon England lacked a lay aristocratic elite that was literate; the ability to compose and read texts was largely restricted to monasteries and churches, where clerics guarded their privilege more or less jealously.

When civic epigraphy does appear in Old English literature, in translations from the Latin such as *The Phoenix* and *Apollonius of Tyre*, it anticipates the role that inscriptionality will come to play in later medieval public life in England. The Old English *Apollonius of Tyre*, commonly thought to have been written in the eleventh century, is the oldest vernacular version of a narrative that probably originated in the fifth century.³⁶ Apollonius’s quest to claim his rightful inheritance after he is driven from his kingdom is punctuated by various inscriptions marking the stages of his journey, a feature that draws attention to literacy and verbal wit as central to the eponymous hero’s character, and indeed to the romance itself. The meta-textual aspects of inscriptions on statues, tombs and architecture also instruct the audience in the roles inscription can play as a form of public writing. Consequently, we will use an analysis of *Apollonius* as a framework through which to elaborate various aspects of public writing in medieval British literature more generally.

First we should note that the statue erected for Apollonius in Tarsus highlights epigraphy’s potential as a democratic use of text in a public space, as writing by and for the people. When Apollonius saves the city from a famine, the citizens (*ceaster-waran*, XV) express their gratitude by erecting a brass statue of the hero engraved with an account of his good deed:

³⁴ MacMullen 1982.

³⁵ See Okasha 1971 for a hand-list of objects from Anglo-Saxon England inscribed with the Roman script. Page 1999 discusses runic inscriptions, mainly on metal and stone. See Clements 2017, 20–30 for commemorative inscriptions.

³⁶ See Archibald 1991, 3–6 and 45–51 for the transmission of the Apollonius story in the Middle Ages.

hig worhton him ane anlicnesse of áre. þe on ðare stræte stod and mid ðare swiðran hand þone hwæte heold and mid þam winstran fet þa mittan træd, and þaron þus awritten: “Das gifu sealde seo ceasterwaru on Tharsum Apollonio þam tiriscan, forðam þe he þæt folc of hungre alesde and heora ceastre gestaðolode”. (X)

they wrought to him a statue of brass, which stood in the street, and with the right hand shed wheat, and with the left foot stood on the measure; and thereon thus wrote: “This gift gave the citizens of Tarsus to Apollonius the Tyrian, because he saved the people from starvation, and restored their city”.

The poem’s insistence on the plural *hig worhton* highlights this as a collective act, wrought by the will, and the resources, of the people. Their goal is to establish a public record that honours Apollonius and informs present and future passers-by *on ðare stræte* about his extraordinary deed with which he *heora ceastre gestaðolode*.

The Phoenix (ninth century) similarly features inscription as a way of marking the extraordinary in the life of a community. The poem resembles a long entry on the legendary bird in a bestiary infused with Christological allegory. It identifies the homeland of the Phoenix as “far from here to the east, in the best of lands” (*feor heoran / eastdælum on æbelast londa*, 1f.), a paradisiac place “removed from those who practise evil” (*afyrred [...] manfremendum*, 5f.). Consequently, the Phoenix cannot easily be observed in its natural habitat. Every now and then, however, it may be spotted when, after being reborn from its ashes, the Christ-like bird leaves the confines “of this earth” (*of þisse eorþan*, 349) to return to its heavenly home. On this occasion, throngs of people gather to watch the wonderous creature in its flight. Moreover, they

gewritum cyðað,
mundum mearciað on marmstane,³⁷
hwonne se dæg ond seo tid dryhtum
geeawe

(332–334)

make it known in writing, marking it by hand
in marble stone, the day and the season when it
was revealed to the multitude.

Having caught a glimpse of the exotic and the divine, the assembled witnesses note the date with an inscription in solid marble stone. Their precise chronicling, then, not only commemorates the extraordinary event for future reference, but also amalgamates the mythical and the historical. Ephemeral creature though it may be, the Phoenix is now attested to by a material record available to “the multitude”. Their choice of material is not incidental. As Robert Henryson observes in his moral fable *The Lion and the Mouse* in the fifteenth century: “When it comes to grievances, men write in marble / I will not expound further / But king and lord know what I mean” (*For hurt,*

³⁷ The manuscript reads *mearm stane*, with the *r* partly erased and the *e* expuncted. As Muir notes, the scribe’s difficulty with this word might suggest that marble was a rare material in Anglo-Saxon England.

men wrytis in the marbill stane. / Mair till expone as now I lett allane / Bot king and lord may weill wit quhat I mene, 1611–1613). We see a similar interest in material longevity in late medieval redactions of the Apocryphal legend of Adam and Eve, where Eve commands Seth to record the lives of his parents in tablets of clay and stone—to survive catastrophes of fire and water, respectively—so that their story may benefit all of humanity.³⁸

The second important point *Apollonius* draws attention to is that the inscription on Apollonius's statue does more than act as an historical record, suggesting additional roles for inscriptionality in the public realm. The poem specifies that the text-bearing statue discharges the debt the citizens owe to the hero for his kind intervention; it is “a gift [...] to Apollonius of Tyre” (*gifu [...] Apollonio þam tiriscan*), but not one that he may carry away with him. Rather, the brass likeness of the hero forms a fixed part of the cityscape, materially incorporating the exile into a new community. Moreover, the statue and inscription may serve apotropaic purposes. Apollonius is not displayed standing still, but as a figure in action, his right hand dispensing wheat forever, perpetuating the hero's agency. In addition, not only his name appears in the inscription; the inscription also records what the statue alone cannot communicate: the happy outcome of Apollonius's benefaction, the restoration of the city, set down in material writing to ward off future famines.

We can see this aspect in other medieval accounts of public inscriptions: even as they function as records directed at the public, they are ultimately expressions of the might wielded by communal leaders, for better or for worse. One familiar example based on historical practice is the military monument, as when Marius erects a great stone attesting to his victory over the Picts in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (1136). J. S. P. Tatlock remarks: “That Geoffrey knew of some such inscription then visible is hard to doubt. Roman inscriptions abound in north England [...]. Many more doubtless existed in his day, for the country folk have been in the habit of defacing them, as being not ‘canny’”.³⁹ Layamon scrupulously includes the erection of the inscribed stone in his *Brut* (c. 1190–1215), an early Middle English version of the chronicle:

³⁸ There are five redactions of the *Apocryphal Lives of Adam and Eve*, all stem from the eighth-century *Vita Adae et Evaæ*, which itself is based on the account by Flavius Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities*. The medieval treatments change the pillars in Josephus to tablets. Furthermore, the account traces the tablets to King Solomon, who prays to God to understand the foreign script and learns of their provenance. As with Belshazzar's Feast, discussed above, the act of inscription itself becomes a kind of miracle, in which divine will forcibly carves out its message on recalcitrant material.

³⁹ See Tatlock 1974. “Canny” here refers to an obsolete Scots term: 5b: “Lucky, safe to meddle with; esp. with the negative”. That is to say that the stones are unlucky. “Canny”, adj. (n. d.). In *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Retrieved from www.oed.com/view/Entry/27143 (last accessed: 30.05.2019).

he lette a-ræren anan. enne swuðe sælcuð
 stan;
 he lette per-on grauen. sælcuðe run-stauen;
 hu he Rodric. of-sloh. & hine mid horsen
 to-droh;
 & hu he þa Peohtes. ouer-com mid his
 fæhtes;
 Vp he sette þæne stan. ȝet he per stondeð;
 swa he deð al swa longe. swa þa wored
 stondeð.

(4967–4972)

He let erect immediately a remarkable stone.

On it he had engraved, strange characters;
 How he killed Rodric and had him drawn apart
 by horses;
 And how he overcame the Picts, conquered by
 his fight;

He set up that stone, and there it still stands;
 So it will do so long as the world stands.

The repetition of *he lette* makes the inscribing and erecting of the stone an extension of Maurius's martial force. The ability to have a monument with such longevity erected as a public record and legacy is itself a reflection of a unique form of agency: the ability to shape the environment reflects a leader's ability to shape the course of communal history, not to mention his power to rend the individual bodies of foes such as Rodric. Tatlock's description of local resistance to the gesture, even centuries later, through the erasure of inscriptions indicates that the monument has an impact that outlasts its own historical moment and audience. The ruler's ability to "write history" is nowhere more evident than in his ability to execute his will on all material forms, be they lithic or human.

This logic is grotesquely apparent in *Richard Coer de Lyon*, when the crusader King hosts a "diplomatic" feast at which he presents each of the Sultan's earls with the boiled head of a prisoner of war: *Hys name faste above hys browe, / What he hyghte and of what kyn born* ("His name [was written] firmly on his forehead / What he was called and of what kin he was born", 3432f.). Since the diplomats have confirmed that Richard has captured their best, most noble warriors, and Richard himself demands that his servants slaughter *the Sarezynys of most renoun, / That be comen of the ryh-chesste kynne* ("the Saracens of most renown / That come from the richest families", 3414f.), the cannibal king literally devours his enemies' patrimony before their horrified eyes.

The first public inscription mentioned in *Apollonius* likewise provides an instructive example of the epigraphical strategies employed by a supreme ruler. King Antiochus has a riddle inscribed into a gate, ostensibly as a pious paternal act to invite potential suitors to vie for the princess's hand. However, the narrator immediately clarifies that this public writing is a sinister exercise in public manipulation, ensuring instead the elimination of all potential suitors so that the king might continue his incestuous assaults on his daughter undetected. Punctuating his inscription with the heads of both those suitors who fail and those who succeed in solving the riddle—"all the heads were set over the gate" (*þa heafda ealle wurdon gesette on ufewear-dan þam geate*, V)—Antiochus's true message articulates the sovereign's power over the space and its inhabitants. Apollonius's terse reply to the King's inquiry if he has

been informed about the rules of the game suggests that he grasps the implications even before he deciphers the riddle: “I know the ordinance, and I saw it at the gate” (*Ic can þone dom. & ic hine æt þam geate geseah*, VII).

The Old English *dom* means both “ordinance” and “judgement”, suggesting that Apollonius recognises the double meaning of what he saw at the gate. He has read the decree (“the ordinance”) and noted the gruesome results of the King’s “judgement”. The decree’s placement as a portal inscription super-titled by the severed heads symbolically reinforces this message. The inscription of an architectural threshold visually illustrates the King’s *dom* that hangs over the heads of all who cross the boundary into his domain. Given that neither the public, nor, for that matter, the princess,⁴⁰ ever benefit from Apollonius’s act of interpretation, it would appear that this public inscription represents a private communication between those competing for power, with little regard for the community at large. As art historian Linda Safran observes in her analysis of public textual culture, we should not assume that public texts were intended to be comprehensible to everyone; in places that had more than one textual community, public texts were still targeted ones.⁴¹

Turning from *Apollonius* now to the private functions of inscriptions, we see inscription as a form of communication between individuals become more evident in English literature with the advent of the Norman Conquest in 1066. The Norman castle-building campaign that changed the English landscape was accompanied by a new literary genre, the romance, whose fantastic narratives highlighted the material resources wielded by the aristocracy in the newly emerging feudal system of the early Middle Ages. Though the CRC database shows us that the number of inscribed objects in English romances is significantly more limited in comparison to their Continental analogues, the engraved ring offers an example of epigraphy’s role as a way of signalling not only private property, but also private communication in the romance.⁴² While rings with inscriptions are found already among the archaeological remains of the Anglo-Saxon period, the engraved ring first makes its literary appearance in Anglo-Norman romances and their Middle English heirs, such as the late thirteenth-century romance, *King Horn*.⁴³

The ring engraved with the name of his beloved that Horn carries functions both as a private symbol between the two lovers and as a protective talisman, casting love

⁴⁰ The violated princess cannot benefit from Apollonius’s wit, as his flight from the King’s assassins apparently forecloses any possibility of her rescue through a publication of the scandal. Her fate remains a loose narrative thread; we can only assume her release comes through the lightning bolt that kills Antiochus and allows Apollonius to accede to the throne.

⁴¹ Safran 2011, 118.

⁴² The CRC database allows one to compare English and German Alexander legends, for example; *Floris and Blauncheflore* to Konrad Fleck’s *Flore und Blanscheflur*; the Anglo-Norman *Romance of Horn* to Middle English *King Horn*.

⁴³ See Okasha 1971. For more on the ring, see Christoph Witt’s chapter on jewellery in this volume.

itself as a magical force whose recollection protects the knight from becoming a physical and psychological casualty of war (565–580). Both *King Horn* and the *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick* (c. 1300) use the ring's portability and the immutable quality attributed to gold in order to make the ring the ultimate marker of identity, as well as a symbol of true love. The disguised Horn employs the ring to make his presence known to his beloved, whereas in *Guy of Warwick*, Felice learns that the pilgrim to whom she offered hospitality was in fact her long-suffering husband when a messenger brings her his ring:

*The levedi tok that ring an hond
And loked theron and gan withstond
The letters forto rede
“Ow, certes”, quath the levedi,
“This ring Y gaf mi lord Sir Gii
When he fro me yede”.*
(3469–3474)

The lady took the ring in [her] hand
And looked up on it, and paused
To read the letters.
“Oh, truly”, said the lady,
“This ring I gave my lord Sir Guy
When he went from me”.

The return of the ring facilitates a hasty reunion that allows Guy to see his wife's face as he draws his last breath. Felice dies soon after, as he predicts she would. Yet, even as the lovers' deaths suggest their profound physical bond, the ring plot device reveals that it is the text-bearing sign of the relationship, not the lover's presence, that guarantees the authenticity of the encounter.

One particular form of inscriptionality in late medieval English literature that stems from the persistence of “courtly love” as a literary trope is the motto: a public text that appears in various mediums and whose role straddles the corporate and the individual body, the private and the public. Incorporated into coats of arms and other armorial bearings, the motto functions in the public domain as a sign of familial, political or social affinity. One might think of it as a kind of branding. However, in literary contexts the motto, like the engraved ring, frequently announces forms of affinity while retaining the discretion demanded by *fins amors*. In the late medieval *Squire of Low Degree*, as the low-born hero sets out to earn a name for himself through feats of arms, the princess demands that he bear a blue shield to signal his fidelity, and furthermore:

*In the myddes of your sheld ther shal be set
A ladyes head, with many a frete;
Above the head wrytten shall be
A reason for the love of me:
Both O and R shall be therin,
With A and M it shall begynne.
(211–216)⁴⁴*

In the middle of your shield there shall be set
A lady's head, with many an ornament;
Above the head shall be written
A motto about your love for me:
Both O and R shall be therein,
With an A and M shall it begin.

⁴⁴ Unlike all other Middle English romances, this fifteenth-century poem is known only through printed editions.

As public writing that can send a private message, the motto exploits the ambivalence of the text. In particular, as a portable inscription the motto underlines that context is significant for meaningful interpretation. One might consider, for instance, scholarly investigations of the motto *De Mieulx en Mieulx* embroidered with precious stones on the gown of the mysterious Lady (line 310) whose clandestine love affair is the subject of John Lydgate's dream vision, *Temple of Glas* (c. 1400–1425). Scholars have combed historical documents for clues as to the betrothal or secret marriage Lydgate might have been referencing in his suggestive poem. Yet, even the fact that *De Mieulx en Mieulx* was the family motto of the influential Paston family during this time is insufficient to lay to rest the riddle posed by a literal reading of the poem.⁴⁵ As J. Allan Mitchell remarks, “if *The Temple of Glas* appears to ‘go public’ with private matters we can no longer identify, there is a way in which fresh documentary evidence (should it ever come to light) would not be enough to settle the text’s meaning” for the poem is “designed to seduce its audience with a spectacle of a secret”.⁴⁶

Even as the motto, especially in a sartorial medium, represents a subjective, personal expression, and is, moreover, appended physically to its ostensible author, in literature it can render the bearer less rather than more legible to an audience. Chaucer's Prioress from *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1386–1400) is a most fitting example of this principle. In her General Prologue description, the motto engraved on her golden brooch, *Amore vincit omnia*, epitomizes the puzzle she poses to audiences (GP 162). The Prioress is a nun whose vocation it is to manifest divine love—what in Greek one would term *caritas*—but whose bearing, as described by Chaucer the Pilgrim-Narrator, suggests an interest in courtly love, better termed *eros*. In contrast to these nuanced Greek terms for different types of love, the Latin *amore* in the Prioress's motto cannot be so easily parsed, thereby suggesting that the inscription functions meta-textually here as a provocation that both invites and refuses interpretation.

As the diverse objects bearing mottos show, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witness a proliferation and diversification of the types of inscribed objects appearing in Middle English texts. While Old Testament, classical and military references continue to circulate, inscriptions now appear in more mundane domestic and secular circumstances: on baldachins, walls and stained glass windows, on a ceremonial mace, on embroidered sleeves and handkerchiefs, on a personal rosary and other forms of accessories.⁴⁷ This abundance may be due, in part, to the changing socio-historical contexts in which medieval authors were writing. The increasing literacy and

⁴⁵ See J. Allan Mitchell's introduction to his edition for the Middle English Text Series (Mitchell 2007).

⁴⁶ See Mitchell 2007.

⁴⁷ Although a major work of the medieval English literature, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, with its multitude of inscribed objects, is not discussed in this chapter since these objects appear first in Malory's French sources. For scholarly considerations of inscriptions in Malory see: Boulanger 2009 and Cawsey 2001. Also illuminating is Robeson 1997, which places Malory's inscriptions in conversation with both French sources, as well as Chaucer and medieval drama.

resources of minor gentry and what we might now call the upper bourgeoisie in the late English Middle Ages meant that textual culture, including inscriptionality, was at the disposal of more members of society.

The extracodical output of one of Chaucer's more well-known fifteenth-century literary successors, John Lydgate, provides insight into the ubiquity of inscriptionality in late medieval urban and ecclesiastical contexts. Lydgate composed poems as parts of wall paintings, tapestries, and even pageant spectacles.⁴⁸ His *Soteltes at the Coronation Banquet*, for instance, were verses written on scrolls or tablets to accompany the sugar decorations (*sobeltes*) brought in with each course at the coronation banquet of the eight-year old Henry VI in 1429. We also find a variety of churches and secular buildings inscribed with Lydgate's poetry. The most remarkable among them is the Clopton chapel in Holy Trinity Church of Long Melford, in Lydgate's home county. The fifteenth-century chapel features six stanzas of Lydgate's *Lamentation of Mary Magdalene* painted on the girder supporting the lower ceiling at its west end, and twenty-six stanzas of his *Testament* carved into wooden plaques that run around the chapel just below the ceiling, most likely commissioned by a local lay benefactor.⁴⁹

In *Piers Plowman* (1370–1390), William Langland takes particular aim at the worldly motives that could lurk behind the patronage of such ecclesiastical inscriptions. Having the absolved Lady Mead (Reward) of her sins in Passus Three, the Father-Confessor suggests that in order to assure herself of a heavenly reward, she could provide the glass window for a church building and have her name engraved in it (3.048–050). The Dreamer quickly undermines the Confessor's proposition that such inscriptions merit divine favour:

Ac God to alle good folk swich gravyng
defendeth—
To wriuen in wyndowes of hir wel dedes—
An aventure pride be peynted there, and
pomp of the world;
For God knoweth thi conscience and thi
kynde wille,
And thi cost and thi coveitise and who the
catel oughte.
Forthi I lere yow lordes, leveth swiche
w[ritynge]es—
To wriuen in wyndowes of youre wel
dedes [...]

(3,064–072)⁵⁰

But God forbids the pious such engraving—
To write in windows of their good deeds—
A dangerous pride is painted there, and the
pomp of the world;
For God knows your consciences and natural
disposition,
And your circumstances, and desires, and who
owes you goods.
Therefore, I advise you lords, leave such
writings—
To write in windows of your good deeds [...]

⁴⁸ Pearsall 1970, 169–183; see also Sponsler 2004, Cornell 1988–1991 and Chaganti 2012.

⁴⁹ See Trapp 1955 and Davis 2017.

⁵⁰ Self-promotion through inscriptions in stained glass appears to be a particular provocation for Langland given that he has Patience return to this critique again in Passus 2,14,197–199.

Seen alongside the ubiquity of inscriptionality in the late medieval environment, Langland's condemnation of the creation of public texts as a function of private interests raises questions about whether English perceptions of inscriptionality changed over time. The proliferation of inscriptionality, not unlike to the exponential increase of texts and tweets in our own time, reconfigures the value of the text in society and may thereby also modify the concept of the author.

3 Inscriptionality and the Rise of English Literary Tradition

In our final section, we explore how inscription in late medieval English literature comes to represent the literary text itself. We particularly attend to the popular dream vision genre that played a central role in the emerging vernacular English literary tradition. One fascinating poem that begs for more scholarly attention is the fifteenth-century *The Assembly of Ladies* (c. 1470–1480), an allegorical account of a *cour amoreuse* noted for the rare presence of a female narrator. Related to this female presence and unusual among the otherwise conventional features of this poem is the detail that the petitions of complaint brought to Lady Loyalty by the ladies unfortunate in love are mottos embroidered on their sleeves. Loyalty's messenger Perseverance explains the court's instructions:

*Al youre felawes and ye must com in blewe,
Everiche yowre matier for to sewe,
With more, whiche I pray yow thynk upon,
Yowre wordes on yowre slevis everichon.*
(116–119)

You and your companions must come in blue,
One and all, to petition for your case,
What's more, which I pray you remember,
Your mottoes [should be] on each of your sleeves.

With the delightful play upon the homophonic verbs *seuen*, linking “to sew” with “to petition”, the author turns the fifteenth-century fashion in England and France of embroidering devices and mottoes in French on the sleeves of garments into a form of legal writing. Consequently, while the first inscription to appear is referred to as *en-browdid* (85), these needlecraft terms are then replaced with verbs that establish the inscriptions as utterances: forms of “to say” appear thrice (207, 307, 488), *compleyne* once (590) and “to write” eight times (308, 364, 583, 597, 616, 627, 645, 659, 667). Only in the materially elaborate description of Lady Loyalty's canopy does the narrator remind us of the materiality of the inscription by observing the motto was [w]rought with the nedil ful straungely / [...] / With grete lettres, the better for to shewe (“wrought with a needle ingeniously [...] with large letters, so as to be more noticeable”, 487–490). More frequently, the mottos are identified with juridical texts: *The first lady, beryng in hir devise / Sanz que jamais, thus wrote she in hir bille* (“The first lady, bearing in her motto / ‘Without ever (giving cause)’, thus she wrote in her petition”, 582f.).

The effect of the legal term “bill”, even in the metaphorical context of the courtly game, draws attention to the frequently gendered nature of textual communities. By juxtaposing the realm of textile production conventionally associated with femininity with the texts circulating in the masculine world of the court and parliament, the poem invites us to consider what access lay women had to inscriptionality as a form of expression. Moreover, the legal metaphor reorients the nature of the utterance itself, transforming it from a symbolic language linked with mystification, as we have seen above, into a speech act that declares, even reveals, a truth otherwise invisible.⁵¹

In this sense, the embroidered sleeves of Loyalty’s petitioners recall Philomela, a famous mythological antecedent from the lists of unfortunate women popularly compiled by late medieval poets; a figure, moreover, whose revenge makes her the archetype for women’s inscriptional practices. In his own martyrology of famous women harmed by the cads of literary history, a dream vision titled *The Legend of Good Women* (c. 1380), Chaucer makes Philomela’s association with inscriptionality explicit:

*This woful lady lerned hadde in youthe
So that she werken and enbroude couthe,
And weven in hire stol the radevore
As it of wemen hath be woned yore.
[...]
She coude eek rede and wel ynow endyte,
But with a penne coude she nat wryte.
But letters can she weve to and fro,
So that, by that the yer was al ago,
She hadde ywoven in a stamyn large
How she was brought from Athenes in a barge,
And in a cave how that she was brought;
And al the thyng that Tereus hath wrought,
She waf it wel, and wrot the stoyre above,
How she was served for hire sistrys love.*
(7,2350–2365)

This woeful lady had studied in her youth
So that she could work and embroider,
And weave the tapestry in her frame
As it was women’s custom in the past.
[...]
She could also read and compose well enough,
But with a pen she could not write.
But letters she could weave to and fro,
So that, by the end of the year,
She had woven a large tapestry
How she was brought from Athens in a barge,
And how to a cave she was brought;
And the things that Tereus wrought,
She wove it well, and wrote the story above,
What she went through because she loved her
sister.

Chaucer’s specification that Philomela communicated with words, not images, along with his assertion that Philomela’s loom easily compensates for the fact that she has not learned how to use a pen, offers inscriptionality as a solution to women’s exclusion from manuscript culture. If we accept that the anonymous fifteenth-century author of *The Assembly of Ladies* inherited this conventional association of women producing textiles in place of texts,⁵² then the female narrator’s refusal to apply a motto

⁵¹ For a detailed discussion of this topic, and of the figure of Philomela discussed below, see Ludger Lieb’s chapter on textiles in this volume.

⁵² Note that John Gower also specifies that Philomela weaves a white silk cloth that contains both letters and images in *Confessio Amantis* 7,2350–2365.

to the blue dress she dons for her visit to Loyalty's court might be explained by considering that the poem itself takes the place of her motto. Her instrument of choice, she asserts, is her pen, and her audience broader than the gynocentric sewing circle.

We conclude this chapter by examining Britain's most renowned English author, Geoffrey Chaucer, to suggest that inscriptionality in late medieval English literature uses visual, material culture to interrogate the nature of literary authorship. The craft evident in the production of inscriptions as visual artefacts draws attention to the value attributed to the texts themselves. We see Lydgate identify poetry with the sleeve motto when the narrator of his *Troy Book* (early fifteenth century) complains that he has no rhetorical "flower / Nor rich colours, stones or jewels", bare as he is "of all cleverness / Through crafty speech to embroider Criseyde's sleeve" (*flour, / Nor hewes riche, stony nor perré [...] of alle coriousté / Thorough crafty speche to enbroude with [Criseyde's] sleeve*, 2,4725–4729). His use of the term *crafty* plays with the definition of "craft" as the handicraft he has just invoked, while simultaneously exploiting the term's association with both dexterity and trickery, thereby cleverly maintaining an ambivalence towards the heroine, whose true nature was the subject of so much medieval poetic debate.⁵³

Chaucer's dream visions, in particular, use inscriptionality to engage with epistemological and hermeneutical questions related to authorship. Whereas most dream visions employ idealised landscape settings—the *locus amoenus* of love-visions—Chaucer's dreamers frequently explore elaborately crafted architectural environments displaying inscriptions of famous literary texts. In *The Book of the Duchess* (1369–1372) the dreamer initially finds himself in a beautiful chamber well fitted with windows depicting the Fall of Troy (322f.; 326f.) and adorned with a fresco:

*And alle the walles with colours fyne
Were peynted, both text and glose,
Of al the Romaunce of the Rose.*
(332–334)

And all the walls with fine colours
Were painted, [with] both the text and gloss,
Of the entire *Romance of the Rose*.

The House of Fame (1379–1380) expands a similar setting in Book One into an extensive ekphrastic sequence. The dreamer's account of famous classical scenes painted and engraved on the walls of a temple of Venus made of glass (120) creates the impression of entering a manuscript, a sense confirmed by an inscription of the opening lines of the *Aeneid*:

⁵³ *Crafti*, adj.. (n. d.). In *Middle English Dictionary Online*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED10153> (last accessed: 30.05.2019). See also Pearsall 1970 on Lydgate's treatment of Criseyde, 134f.

*But as I romed up and doun,
I fond that on a wall ther was
Thus writen on a tablet of bras:
“I wol now syng, yif I kan,
The armes and also the man
That first cam, thurgh his destinee,
Fugityf of Troy contree,
In Itayle, with ful moche pyne
Unto the strandes of Lavyne”.*

(140–148)

But as I roamed up and down,
I found that on a wall there was
Thus written on a tablet of brass:
“I will now sing, if I can,
[Of] the arms and also the man
That first came, because of his destiny,
Fugitive of Troy’s country,
In Italy, with much suffering
To the streams of Lavinia”.

The ekphrasis that follows, with references to both painted and engraved images, proceeds for several stanzas (151–292), until the dreamer reaches Virgil’s account of Dido and Aeneas. At this point, the poem executes a dramatic volta: *But let us speke of Eneas, / How he betrayed hir, allas* (293f.), which invokes Ovid’s contrasting sympathetic portrayal of Dido in the *Heroides*. The accompanying switch to direct speech draws attention to the tension between Virgilian and Ovidian narratives, an instability in a foundational story for English literary culture.

Chaucer’s *House of Fame* progressively erodes the authority of textual tradition through its elaboration of the diverse materials bearing inscriptions. At the outset of the poem, the Virgilian brass tablet depends on our assumption that the extracodical text represents a collective legacy, where the materials and labour required to produce it manifest the *auctoritas* attributed to the utterance. The *matière* underscores the cultural significance of the *sens*. However, Chaucer’s subsequent invocation of contrasting perspectives on Dido, his challenge to the reader to *[r]jede Virgile in Eneydos / Or the Epistle of Ovyde* (378f.) threatens to make the brass inscription analogous to a false epitaph. Dido’s direct speech lamenting *wikke[d] Fame* (349) begins Chaucer’s inquiry into the arbitrariness of cultural legacy in a society still heavily invested in the intellectual tradition passed down from the great authors of the past.

Chaucer deploys inscriptionality to illustrate this point again in Book Three when he encounters a giant boulder that he must climb to reach Fame’s Palace. The dreamer wonders what kind of stone it is, “for it shone like glassy alum, but more brightly” (*For hyt shoon lyk alum de glas, / But that hyt shoon ful more clere*, 1123–1125). When he discovers that the “congealed material” (*congealed matere*) is “a rock of ice and not of steel” (*a roche of yse, and not of stel*), the dreamer exclaims on the precariousness of Fame’s abode (1130). While the precarity of Fame’s house has literary precedents, Chaucer uniquely imagines this hill of ice as also covered with inscriptions, making it quite literally a “foundational” text:

*Tho sawgh I al the half ygrave
With famous folkes names fele,
That had iben in mochel wele,
And her fames wide yblowe.
But wel unnethes koude I knowe
Any lettres for to rede
Hir names by; for, out of drede,
They were almost ofthowed so
That of the lettres oon or two
Was molte away of every name,
So unfamous was woxe hir fame.*
(1136–1146)

There I saw half [of it] engraved
With many names of famous people,
That have been in great well-being,
And their fame widely known.
But with great difficulty could I discern
Any letters in order to read
Their names; for, certainly,
They were almost thawed so
One or two of the letters
Of every name was melted away,
So obscure had grown their reputations.

The deceptively stable appearance of ice as a material for inscription gestures towards a vulnerability in textual tradition, represented here by the vanishing names of those who once had fame. Furthermore, the dreamer's curious qualification that the names were *molte avey with hete*, rather than *away with stormes bete* makes their fate an inevitability, rather than a catastrophe striking an unlucky few (1150). Meanwhile, the names on the northern side of the hill remain “as fresh as if men had written them here that same day” (*as fressh as men had writen hem here / The selve day ryght*), preserved not by merit but by the felicity of being in the shade of Fame's palace (1156f.).

This unusual image of inscriptions melting begs interpretation. Melting matter could evoke the erasable wax tablet that was a part of schooling and everyday scholarly life for the medieval audience, a symbol that, according to Florence Bougne, haunts late medieval depictions of vernacular engravings as metaphors for writing.⁵⁴ Alternately, Kathy Cawsey makes a compelling case for the hill of ice as a reference to popular manuscripts damaged by use or preserved by neglect, thereby again drawing attention to the vagaries of cultural transmission.⁵⁵ We would argue, however, that since Book Three ends with the circulation of utterances disarticulated from their sources in the House of Rumour, the instability of the *matière* here does not erase the utterance itself, but rather the name of its author, thus destabilising the relation between the verse-maker and his verbal artefact. On the one hand, this anticipates the poem's presentation of the fickleness of Fame that immediately follows; on the other, it participates in a larger metatextual question that haunts the poem: the question of authorship and authority.

In other words, what is at stake is not the precarity of textual transmission, but rather the ambiguous conditions of the text's reception. What guarantees the text's value to its audience? Jacqueline Miller observes that Chaucer and his contemporaries were men who struggled “to find the proper balance between their claims for poetic

⁵⁴ Bougne 2011.

⁵⁵ Cawsey 2004.

independence and their reliance on the sanction of traditional [...] *auctores*".⁵⁶ Chaucer's dreamer moves from the ekphrasis of Book One's classical legacy to the resonant chambers of Fame's palace—filled with images of *auctores* and extensively described, but noticeably lacking in inscriptions—to the final cacophony of Rumour's whirling house of twigs. In this last space, a place materially inimical to inscription, he reveals a world in which vast amounts of texts move, but without the authoring principle once required.

Recalling that Chaucer's poem participates in a long dream vision tradition, one might read the noise of Chaucer's House of Rumour as an acoustic analogue to the mysterious scripts on antediluvian tablets or Babylonian walls that require a miraculously empowered guide to decipher. Indeed, as we have seen, the prophetic model for the poetic genre depends on such a guide, whose revelation of both the source of the message and its correct interpretation elucidates the true state of things for the audience. Not surprisingly, then, Chaucer's dreamer turns with the clamouring crowd to witness the approach, albeit belatedly, of a figure who seems to be *a man of gret auctorite* (2157), his own version of St Erkenwald, if you will. However, it is an approach that extends infinitely; for this is the last line of the poem. Instead the audience is left alongside the dreamer in this house full of "pilgrims with satchels brimful of lies" (*pilgrimees / With scrippes bret-ful of lesinges*, 2121f.), a vastly expanded realm of authors and audiences that, many scholars have noted, anticipates the socially variegated world of Chaucer's greatest work, *The Canterbury Tales*.

Whether or not *The House of Fame* is intentionally unfinished, the end result is one typical of Chaucer in its refusal to offer what Anne Middleton calls "a pedagogic-progress plot: present your speaker with an ultimate vision or revelation which will make intellectual and emotional coherence of all that has led to it".⁵⁷ Middleton has famously argued that Chaucer and his Ricardian contemporaries developed "public poetry", where the speaker presents himself as "one worker among others" whose task it is "to find the common voice and to speak for all, but to claim no privileged position, no special revelation from God or the Muses, no transcendent status for the result".⁵⁸ In Chaucer's *House of Fame*, then, we can read his erosion of the "public text" inscribed on the monument as an effect of his early efforts to develop a form of "public poetry" characterized by immanent, worldly experience rather than posing as a transcendent, static "treasury of wisdom". This emerging notion of "public poetry" at the outset of an English literary tradition executes a remarkable shift in perspective on how epigraphy generates meaning. Confronted with the inscribed object, the audience may no longer ask, "who had the power to incise this text, and what does this inscription mean?", but rather "what is the social currency of this text? Does the inscription in fact speak to me?"

⁵⁶ Miller 1982, 95.

⁵⁷ Middleton 1978, 119.

⁵⁸ Middleton 1978, 99.

While this chapter is dedicated to highlighting the particularities of narrated inscriptions in British literature, our overview nevertheless suggests that medieval Britain can be seen as a microcosm for how inscriptionality developed in the European West. We witnessed a steadily increasing variety of inscribed objects as literacy spread from the ecclesiastical domain in the early Middle Ages, was appropriated by secular courtly culture in the High Middle Ages and found its way into a late medieval urban landscape transformed by a post-feudal economy. Even in the face of these changes, literary texts from all of these periods frequently constructed inscribed artefacts as encounters with the past. Like the mysterious pagan grave in the heart of London's great cathedral in *St Erkenwald*, inscribed objects present traces of ancient civilisations while forcing us to recognise that the past cannot entirely be known or deciphered. This in turn incites us to inscribe ourselves in the material and textual world in ways that we hope will be legible to the future.

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