"THE BACK-AND-FORTH FORM": EPISTOLARITY IN LATE MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

A Dissertation
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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by

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DECEMBER 2020

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“THE BACK-AND-FORTH FORM”: EPISTOLARITY IN LATE MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Emma Lipton, for shepherding this project from the initial germ of an idea, emerging unexpectedly – to me but perhaps not to her – from my MA thesis in 2014 to its current form. She has shaped not only the content but also helped me to discover methods and theoretical frameworks as well as to cultivate habits of thought and work that will serve me in my career as a scholar. I could not have asked for a better supervisor for this project or a better advisor and mentor for my graduate career.

The project was substantially shaped by the courses I took with and the feedback I received from my committee members. So much of my thinking about epistolarity and bodies came from a wacky essay I wrote in Dr. Manion's crusades seminar, in my very last semester of coursework. Dr. Moore's Old French seminar also introduced me to the *lais* of Marie de France, and the conversations we had about *Laüstic* in that class not only shaped the reading of the text that ended up in the dissertation but were also foundational for my thinking about classical reception and issues of translation. Dr. Kramer's Old English class was the very first class I sat in as a graduate student, and I cannot imagine my years at Mizzou without her gentle ribbing and insightful comments on my work. Discussions in her Old English Saints' Lives class about how objects and texts interact were hugely formative for me. My entire committee has been a dream to work with– utterly professional, engaged, and responsive. Any remaining failings and infelicities – both syntactic and conceptual – are mine alone.

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“THE BACK-AND-FORTH FORM”: EPISTOLARITY IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

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ABSTRACT

The project explores medieval epistolarity as a medium and genre. I examine the body of rhetorical theory that described the purpose and form of the letter, the *ars dictaminis*. I apply contemporary media theory to medieval definitions of epistolarity, and I assert that we can read these definitions as a medieval media theory. Medieval writers were interested in the way that the letter worked and represented the epistolary circuit in literary texts as an event that draws together bodies in motion. The chapters of my dissertation examine the categories of body and movement instantiated in the epistolary circuit. Chapter 1 examines the role of the seal in hagiographies, arguing that the imagined mechanics of the seal and its relationship to its issuer’s human body resonates with the relic, a vestige of a saint’s human body that preserves the saint’s miraculous, superhuman efficacy across time. Chapter 2 looks at the way the messenger’s body is a locus of anxiety for epistolary theorists and medieval authors. The messenger’s excessively human faculties emerge as cites of potential failure. Chapter 3 centers the performative elements of the epistolary circuit, arguing that the epistolary present tense is especially momentous. The timing of the epistolary performance, its ability to capture a momentous present tense, received special attention in dramas. Chapter 4 investigates the relationship between the first-person sender or author and the second-person addressee instantiates within the text the circulation of meaning across various embodiments.

Introduction:

Theory and History of the "the back-and-forth form"

The past, when it was sick right down
to its roses, obsessively checked the mail.
We wore all of our pathways checking
the mail. We went into the woods because
we heard the letters rustling, and we swore
they sounded like letters to us. Even Thoreau,
on Walden Pond, checked his open mouth
every morning, foolishly believing it to be
the mail. We worshipped a great white
body that was an avalanche of good news,
and we slit it open in every part. "That can't
go through the mail," the postman gasped,
"because that is a super-stabbed body!"
The super-stabbed body rose up, with many
butterknives sticking out of it, and said "I AM
the mail."[1]

The epigram above from Patricia Lockwood's "Why Haven't You Written" in her 2014 collection, *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals*, illustrates some of the critical threads I draw together in my study of medieval epistolarity: the medium's historical specificity, its insistent embodied-ness, and its explicit circuity – its back-and-forth-ness. She articulates the historical specificity of the letter: the "past" itself is the subject of the first verb, and she suggests that the habits of thought inculcated by the epistolary medium are a condition of its regular mode of delivery. The medium and its conventional mode of transmission therefore shape the affective engagements that its users have with it.

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[1] Patricia Lockwood, "Why Haven't You Written" in *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals* (New York: Penguin, 2014), ll. 1-13.

Lockwood renders the mail as a body, one that potentially overwhelms its users, becoming an "avalanche." Lockwood presses on the absurdity of the image, making the epistolary body one subject to violence by its users, who "slit it open in every part." The mail then becomes frighteningly lively, asserting a self-conscious, employing first personhood, and declaring "I AM the mail." The mail is at once a process of communication and a collection of individually and emphatically embodied first-person documents.

The poem crystallizes for me the strangeness of the letter, which Lockwood terms the "back-and-forth-form."[2] My project is to examine how medieval writers dealt with this strange form, which draws together various bodies in motion, creating a circuit of signification that disperses meaning through and across its constituent – textual, material, and human – elements. The project takes as its premise the theorizations of the letter offered by the *ars dictaminis*, treating these definitions of the letter as a medieval media theory. These theories of epistolarity, along with the *ars dictaminis* as a whole, were formative in the education of medieval England's bureaucratic class, and these medieval theorizations of epistolarity are thus in concert with documentary culture and the institutional histories of diplomacy.

I read the definitions of epistolarity in the *ars dictaminis* as a medieval media theory, considering how the definitions pay attention to the relationships that the letter engenders between and among its users. Reading these theorizations thus facilitates my readings of scenes of epistolarity in literary texts. I argue that when literary texts present epistolarity they do so through the lens of their own generic preoccupations.

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[2] Lockwood, "Why Haven't You Written," l.15

Hagiographies, I notice, pay attention to the seal and how it is theoretically resonant with reliquary discourse. When messengers appear in romances, they manifest the genre's concern with the mechanics of statecraft and its violent implications for the bodies that do the work of instantiating the states in question. Epistolary temporality, which I read as a particularly momentous present tense, rather tenaciously intersects with the medieval drama's mode of temporality and deixis. Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and Gower's *Cinkante Balades* each engage the letter's form of address, its lashing together of the first person and second person pronouns and its relegation of them into specific textual roles, and present them as materially mediated categories. Medieval writers used epistolarity, a medium that was particularly preoccupied with the relationship between textual and human embodiment, to think through various categories of textual meaning.

Documentary Culture

The form of the medieval letter is particularly bound up in its institutional history, its relationship to bureaucratic culture. Imported from continental schools in France and Boulogne as a means of codifying the output of the Chancery and of instructing its clerks, the *ars dictaminis*, the field of rhetorical study and instruction dedicated to the practice of letter-writing, expresses the interconnectedness of epistolary form and the institutions that produced them. The *ars dictaminis* not only shaped how diplomatic letters were produced and written during the period, but the precepts contained therein shaped and reflected notions of bureaucratic epistolarity and its documentary efficacy. This dissertation argues that medieval epistolarity straddles the domains of bureaucratic and

literary cultures, which were mutually constitutive.[3] An investigation of medieval epistolarity should therefore draw on bureaucratic and literary contexts to consider how the letter responded to cultural questions about literacy, forms of address, and textual communities.

While historians of rhetoric have examined the ways in which the letters written by bureaucrats and diplomats reflected the stylistic precepts of the *dictatores*, I am interested in the letter as a *form*. What made a letter a letter? How does the letter's form reflect its epistolary situation – that is, the distance, both spatial and temporal, between its sender and intended recipient(s). The letter can be understood as both a medium and a genre. Some epistolary features, such as the form of address, refer to the letter's specific linguistic content, like the pronouns used to refer to the sender and recipient. Other epistolary features, like the seal or the messenger, are material, and *mediate* the relationship between the text and its users as well as instantiating or moderating the relationship among the letter's users. Focusing on epistolary form and media allows us to see that the letter is a historically and materially instantiated category of literary and textual meaning.

Although the documentary nature of medieval law has received much scholarly attention, I recognize the epistolarity of documents and epistolary element of legal documents. Not only did epistolary theories emerge as a bureaucratic discourse, the medieval letter as a medium was largely a tool of institutional power. M. T. Clanchy's influential and galvanizing *From Memory to Written Record,* which traced the role of the

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[3] I am using "bureaucratic" to modify the profession and the personnel and "legal" to describe the texts produced by the bureaucracy.

document from the Norman Conquest to the early fourteenth century, disdains "letter" as an ambiguous generic term, inadequate for the several types of documents that contain "statements issued by individuals." [4] Instead, he divides this capacious record type into five categories: charters, chirographs, certificates, letters, and writs. Charters, public letters conveying property, were issued by the donor and addressed to the general public rather than the beneficiary, who retained the document. Chirographs record an agreement between two parties. The agreement was written out in duplicate and cut in half, with each party retaining one copy, which was often appended by the seal of the other party. Clanchy reserves the term "letters" (*litterae*) for literary missives, such as the correspondences of Abelard and Heloise, Peter the Venerable, and St. Bernard, noting that in the thirteenth century more mundane letters begin to appear. Clanchy divides writs (*brevia*) into letters patent and letters close.[5] Letters patent were very similar to charters, open documents held by their beneficiaries. Letters close would be sealed for confidentiality, opened by their recipient, and then either destroyed or stored in an archive. While Clanchy argues against lumping these all together as letters, it is important to recognize the epistolary character of all these documentary forms. These documents all

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[4] See M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 3rd edition (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 85. Clanchy's pioneering study of the relationship between literacy and the increasing prevalence of documentary culture from the Norman Conquest through the reign of Edward I revised assumptions about modes of medieval literacies. Rather than dividing the population into literate and illiterate, Clanchy accounts for multiple modes of engaging with and understanding documents. He argues that by the end of the thirteenth century, members of every social stratum had first-hand experience of documents as legal instruments and understood the written document rather than symbolic object as the chief means of legal proof.

[5] See Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record,* 86-88.

refer to an epistolary situation: the sender/issuer is separated by time and space from the document's recipient. We can thus see them as invoking the epistolary circuit.

The importation of dictaminal treatises into England and the development of the *ars dictaminis* as a discourse that defined the epistolarity that governs the documents above are inextricably linked to the emergence of the Chancery as a bureaucratic center, responsible for the proliferation of documents. Martin Camargo has assembled the field-standard history of the *ars dictaminis* in England, tracing the discourse from its importation in the 1180s to its decline by the fifteenth century.[6] The discourse had already been established in two distinct traditions on the continent before arriving in England: the Bolognese school (the putative originators of the discourse), and the French school, which inherited and modified Italian precepts. The *ars dictaminis* made its entry into England via Peter of Blois' *Libellus de arte dictandi rhetorice*. Its synthesis of French and Italian styles becomes characteristic of English *dictatores*. Subsequent identifiable, early *dictatores* include: Geoffrey of Vinsauf, who allows space for discussion of the letter in two works on prose composition, Gervase of Melkeley, John of Garland, and Geoffrey of Eversely. [7] During the reign of Henry II (1154-89), the Chancery expanded in scale and advanced in precision to the point of mass-producing royal documents by the hundreds per week; the form of the writs, formal written orders in

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[6] Martin Camargo, *Medieval Rhetorics of Prose Composition Five English Artes Dictandi and their Tradition* (Binghamton: SUNY-Binghamton Press, 1995), 1-20.

[7] Three texts are attributed to Geoffrey: *Summa de arte dictandi* (Bologna 1188-90, never circulated in England), and two works both titled *Documentum de modo de arte dictandi et versificandi* (almost exclusively circulated in England). Gervase of Melkelely wrote, *De arte versificatoria et modo dictandi*, (1213-16). The latter two theorists are both expatriates and their works (*Parisiana poetria* c. 1220 and *Ars epistolaris ornatus* c. 1270, respectively) are less influential on English dictaminal traditions.

the name of the King, was largely standardized and the king's signing automated via the seal-press. As the production of documents increased and the process of production became increasingly formalized, so too did the bureaucratic apparatus and offices responsible for the composition and dissemination of documents.

The fluidity of personnel between categories of textual production – the same persons producing both bureaucratic and literary texts – suggests a similarly fluid categorization of the texts themselves. Because their authors operated at a nexus of multiple literary modes, so too did the letter itself. When poet-bureaucrats, whose careers necessitated a familiarity with the legal and bureaucratic functions of letters, include letters in their work, we can presume that they invoked the institutional theorizations of epistolarity espoused in the *ars dictaminis*. Scholars have identified the overlapping personnel of academic, bureaucratic, and poetic circles.[8] Late medieval writers produced texts in various roles and occupations. Richard Firth Green identifies the earliest literary bureaucrats, Walter Map, Gerald of Wales, Peter of Blois, Richard of Hoveden, and Roger of Ely, as career politicians emerging from ecclesiastical circles.[9] Ethan Knapp draws a distinction between the members of this group. He divides those writers, whose compositions derived from an ecclesiastical tradition and did not reflect a concern with the emergent vernacular, from later poets, such as Thomas Hoccleve, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, and Thomas Usk. Knapp posits a close relationship between the bureaucratic and literary discourses of the period, arguing that the "literary culture of the

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[8] See discussions below of the careers of Thomas Usk, Thomas Hoccleve, and Geoffrey Chaucer.

[9] Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 26-45.

early fifteenth century... cannot be adequately understood except as products of an emerging lay bureaucracy."[10] The difficulty of distinguishing literary from bureaucratic textual output should lead us to consider the various works as engaged in similar acts of meaning-making.

The categorical flexibility of these authors suggest that letters were also probably theorized across genres and practices. Adapting this approach in *Documentary Culture and the Making of English Literature,* Emily Steiner argues that documentary and literary texts were interdependent. Documentary culture does not, for Steiner, refer to a discrete field of phenomena, artifacts, or actors but rather to the questions asked about the relationships between the document and its various users. Steiner defines documentary poetics as "the ways in which legal documents – both their external material forms and their internal rhetorical modes – call attention simultaneously to poetic form and cultural practice."[11] Similarly, my study of medieval epistolarity considers how the letter's rhetorical and literary qualities both gesture at and are informed by its social realities – the institutions and practices responsible for the production and dissemination of letters.

In order to appreciate the letter's social function and utility, we must situate it within the period's documentary culture and read letters in the context of their bureaucratic functions. Building on Clanchy's work, several scholars have focused on the imagined function of documents and the relationships they construct between their various users. In *A Crisis of Truth*, Richard Firth Green argues that the proliferation of

[10] Ethan Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse: Thomas Hoccleve and the Literature of Late Medieval England*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 2-3.

[11] Emily Steiner, *Documentary Culture and the Making of English Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 17.

documents as instruments of legal "trouthe" made it difficult to "maintain an illusion of communal coherence founded on ethical truth."[12] If Green focuses on the way the suffusion of the legal world with documents could confuse and disempower the populace, Steven Justice's *Writing and Rebellion* traces the use of documents by the participants in the Peasants' Revolt as an empowering appropriation. Examining the implications of six letters, which imitate the form of the letter patent, circulated among the rebels, Justice argues that the disenfranchised rebels practiced an *assertive* literacy, whereby they "announced that they were taking over this space and taking over the forms that went with it."[13] While the rebels targeted the bureaucracy and its associated documents throughout the insurrection, they did not merely destroy the documentary instruments of their oppression; the rebels sought to recreate the record to suit their needs.[14] The rebels' letters offer an example of the way the use of documents empowers the users and endows them with a mode of authority. The epistolary theories espoused by the *ars dictaminis*, which I see as a media theory, were constituted within and helped to shape bureaucratic, documentary culture. These theories then help us to see how epistolary texts draw together various bodies and objects into a network of bureaucratic signification and meaning-making.

Reading the *Ars Dictaminis* as a Medieval Media Theory

I read the theorizations of epistolarity contained in the *ars dictaminis* as a medieval media theory. I use these materials that have heretofore been assessed in terms

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[12] Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 38.

[13] Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 66.

[14] Justice, *Writing and Rebellion,* 54-65.

of the history, theory, and practice of rhetoric to address questions of mediation. Simply put, I ask media theory questions of rhetorical materials. I argue that these theorizations of the letter not only consider the genre and form of the letter, but the medium as well. They consider how the letter shapes how people use it and how it instantiates relationships among its users. There are two principle strains of scholarship that address letters within medieval cultural practices: the body of scholarship examining actual letter collections composed by medieval writers and critical inquiry into rhetorical *artes dictaminis*. A representative example of the way that letters have often been studied in the field is the extensive body of scholarship surrounding the Paston letter collection, which examines the collection for evidence of medieval cultural practices, mining the letters for evidence thereof.[15] Rather than particular textual witnesses of individual letters, I am interested in the way medieval writers and thinkers theorized epistolarity as a whole, the many bodies and objects drawn together in the exchange of letters, rather than the letter divorced from the context of its production and transmission.

Modern scholars of the *ars dictaminis* have shown that medieval rhetoricians employed epistolary conventions such as the *narratio* or *accessus ad auctores* for pedagogical purposes. Critical inquiry has often been focused on defining the *ars dictaminis* as a significant discourse in the Middle Ages, tracing its rise and fall, detailing the contributions of its major voices and authors, and examining how authors such as Chaucer adopted and referred to rhetoric in other genres.[16] This work asserting the

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[15] For example, see Norman Davis, "Style and Stereotype in Early English Letters" in *Leeds Studies in English* (n.s.11967), 7-17; and Ann Haskell "The Paston Women on Marriage in Fifteenth-Century England," *Viator* 4.1 (1973): 459-72.

[16] See Martin Camargo, *Ars Dictaminis, Ars Dictandi* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1991), "Where's the Brief? The Ars Dictaminis and Reading/Writing between the Lines"

relevance of the *ars dictaminis* and that literary authors were influenced by it is a crucial backdrop for my own argument. I argue that when we see it as a media theory, we can see more fully how these contemporary authors adopted the notions of textuality and embodiment contained therein in their own depictions of epistolarity and epistolary mediation.

I suggest that we can read the *ars dictaminis* as a medieval media theory that carefully accounts for the relationships that the letter generates between the object and its users. Theorists of contemporary media emphasize the way that digital modes of communication force us to un-think assumptions about the relationship between texts and their users and the status of texts as objects. These assumptions, which had been ossified by five centuries of print media, are beginning to crumble as a result of emerging digital media forms. Taking into account the various processes and actors involved in epistolary production, dissemination, and reception allows us to see the schema in which letters are both physically and discursively constituted. Medieval letters offered their users various modes of use and engagement, and medieval epistolary discourse, which accounts for the means through which epistolary texts are instantiated, should be recognized as a media theory.

Disputatio (1996): 1-17; and "The Waning of the Medieval *Ars Dictaminis*" *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 19.2 (2001): 135-40). For a comprehensive study of epistolary culture, see Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1976). For a comprehensive of the *ars dictaminis* as a medieval practice rooted in particular institutions and related to other contemporary discourses, see William Patt, "The Early 'Ars Dictaminis' as Response to a Changing Society" *Viator* 9 (1978): 133-56. For other bibliography on the discipline, see James Murphy, *Medieval Rhetoric: A Select Bibliography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989). In "Chaucer's Heliotropes and the Poetics of Metaphor" *Speculum* 72.2 (1997): 399-427, Peter Travis examines the traces of rhetoric in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" and the prologue of the *Legend of Good Women.*

If contemporary media theorists understand the process of mediation as the translation of events across objects,[17] then the writers of medieval epistolary manuals can be understood as medieval media theorists. These manuals emphasize the status of the letter as a material object, operating in an exchange among and across bodies. As mentioned above, multiple bodies collaborate in the composition of the letter, and the same is true for the letter's transmission and delivery. The seal extends the author's personal authority, while the body of the letter itself makes its way across space and time by means of its attachment to the messenger's human body. The letter almost parasitically relies upon the messenger's human, ambulatory faculties in order to reach its destination and recipient. The body of the letter and the messenger's human body cooperate to complete the epistolary circuit, offering different modes of engagement with the text's content. When the letter-writing manuals explain this process, they account for and even emphasize the *multiple* bodies involved in an epistolary exchange. It is not only the distant bodies of the sender and recipient that are in play, but also the body of the messenger as well as that of the letter, the corporeality of which these passages highlight. These formulations encourage us to understand the medieval letter as a medium particularly identified with its own materiality, and as an embodied participant operating within a network of bodies.

Medievalists who employ media studies take up, either implicitly or explicitly Lisa Gitelman's assertion that "like old science, old media also seem unacceptably

[17] See Jen Boyle and Martin K. Foys, "Becoming Media" *postmedieval* 3.1 (2012), 3.

unreal."[18] Medieval scholars have taken pains to defend against potential accusations of anachronism. Implicit at the outset of many of these studies is that each scholar must defend their notion of taking a field of study ostensibly rooted in the assessment of novel media technologies and applying it to a historical context. In their introduction to the 2012 issue of *Postmedieval*, titled "Becoming Media," dedicated to medieval media studies, Jen Boyle and Martin Foys posit:

> the in-between of media and mediation is as much a historical investment as it is a phenomenological and ontological problem. On the one hand, the 'new' in our refrain of 'new media' betrays the uncritical assumption that media can appear from the ether as novel innovations unfettered by their remediations in and through the past.[19]

Our understanding of media itself is mediated by the temporal distance between its historical users and its contemporary scholars. Ingrid Nelson, in an essay on the mobility and circulation of media in Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale," offers a similar sentiment about the crucial contributions that medieval studies can offer media studies:

> what premodern literature has to offer so-called 'new' media theory is the awareness that 'mediation' expresses not only the relationship between a human and her machine technology but is in fact a condition of life in a culture.

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[18] Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 4. This quote in fact serves as the epigram for the Editors' Introduction to *Becoming Media*

[19] Martin Foys and Jen Boyle, "Introduction" *Exemplaria* 25, no.3 (March 2012): 1.

> Premodern media are not simply containers of information; rather, they integrate message, materiality, reception, cultural meanings.[20]

Applying Nelson's ideas to epistolarity, I argue that not only can medieval media, such as the letter, be understood in terms of contemporary media theories, but understanding the historically instantiated processes of mediation involved in the exchange of medieval letters allows us to see the ways in which processes have become invisible to us.

Media theorists from Plato to N. Katharine Hayles have addressed the relative agency of the media-object and its users, and this is a crucial question when approaching medieval letters, which draw together more users and objects than many other media. In chapter 2, I put forward the framework of the epistolary *circuit* of human and non-human bodies that medieval epistolary exchanges establish and enact. The notion of agency between medium and user developed by the following media theorists serves as a precursor for my later discussion of the multimodal relationships engendered by the medieval epistolary exchange.

A site of terminological contention in media studies illuminates a salient point about the way we consider the media of the past. Media histories tend to construct linear narratives that overrepresent either human innovation or the inevitable forward motion of technological innovation.[21] Media archaeologies, rather, attempt to encounter the media *in situ*, and try not to decouple the media from the circumstances that inform and shape its use and proliferation. A media archaeology of the medieval letter would thus account

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[20] Ingrid Nelson, "Premodern Networks and Networks of Transmission in the *Man of Law's Tale*" *Exemplaria* 25, no. 3 (March 2012): 212.

[21] This is to say, the narratives are either: look at this chain of innovators building on one another's work or the progress becomes inevitable and is decoupled from the material circumstances that generate it.

for the loci in which letters were often produced, the technologies used to craft them, as well as the discourse that arose to theorize and codify them. Media archaeologies, which resist the teleological narratives of media histories, emphasize both the technological and historical specificities of the medium they treat. When I look at the theorizations of epistolarity in the *ars dictaminis* or depictions of epistolarity in medieval literature, my readings must therefore attend to the historically specific modes of composition and delivery that ferried medieval letters from their senders to recipients.

Media Agencies

Media theories account for the relative agencies of media-objects and their users. The etymology of *media* (plural of Latin *medium*, middle) privileges intermediacy and between-ness. Therefore from the outset the very notion of media and mediation foregrounds the relationships between and among the media and the humans who use it. Media theorists thus focus on the problem of agency as it draws to the fore the power dynamics between the two entities: the media and their users. A brief survey of the history of agency in media theory helps elucidate the relationship between the letter and its users – the various bodies and offices involved in the composition and dissemination of letters such as the scribe, messenger, author, recipient – as well as the power dynamics the letter engenders among its users.

Plato’s *Phaedrus* serves as a sort of *locus classicus* of media theory, and Plato’s dismissal of writing therein as a mere mnemonic aid, secondary to speech, has long been a starting point for later theorists who consider the relative agency of media and their users. These passages introduced several formative and enduring points of contention concerning media: writing versus speech, absence versus presence, and immediacy versus

mediation. Plato argues for speech's primacy, connecting it to the present body of its speaker: "You would imagine that [writings] had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer."[22] At the moment of completion, the connection between the text and the body of its author is severed. Writing, in this framework, is static and immutable, fixed in a particular moment in the past. Plato envisions the speaker and his voice as displaced by the written text. This notion was taken up extensively by post-structuralist philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, but the *Phaedrus*' focuses on the materiality of writing and considers writing as a technology that proceeds from and extends human agency.[23] In this construction, writing attempts to exteriorize the speaker, but only does so unsatisfactorily. Moreover, the reliance on writing as a material vehicle for the speaker's voice diminishes the mnemonic self-sufficiency of the medium's users.

The philosophers of the Frankfurt School, representatively Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" take a similarly dim view of the emerging midcentury technologies of mass media perpetuated by the news and entertainment industries who engineer culture as a set of mass-marketed commodities.[24] The media determine the nature of their consumption; overwhelmed by a regular suffusion of the "monopolistic" mass media output, the audience becomes increasingly susceptible and passive. In this conception of the relationship between media

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[22] Plato. *Phaedrus*, trans. Christopher Rowe. (London: Penguin, 2004): 278-79.

[23] See Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

[24] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." in T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer. *Dialectics of Enlightenment,* trans. John Cumming, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

and users, both entities lose all individuality and agency: the users are subsumed into one conglomeration of consumers whose needs are rendered identical through repeated exposure to the cultural products dished out by the culture industry. The media function as a prosthesis of industry and work to disempower their users.

The question of the relative agencies of media-objects and their users still divides the field of contemporary media studies, which builds on the work of Marshall McLuhan. His seminal 1964 book, *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man*, redirected academic attention to the media in which content is communicated. Coining the oft-repeated, now hackneyed phrase, "the medium is the message," McLuhan posits that the medium impacts its users not through the content it carries but through its own physical and technological properties.[25] The subtitle of this seminal text reflects a crucial point of McLuhan's theory – that media is an extension of human agency, functioning almost prosthetically. Friedrich Kittler, in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, builds on McLuhan's work to craft his notion of media science, but negates McLuhan's notion of media as human prosthesis, and instead argues for a sort of qualified autonomy for media technologies.[26] He considers human beings to be adjuncts to media technologies, rather than their owners or agents. Both of these constructions insist on a binary construction of *all* media and *all* users. For McLuhan, all media function prosthetically of their human users, and for Kittler, human users only function secondarily to the relentless forward motion of media technology.

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[25] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

[26] Friedrich Kittler, *Grammophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

For N. Katharine Hayles, media – like their users – are always and crucially embodied, and she argues that seeing information as disembodied allows us to disregard the cultural and social realities at work. Hayles' pivotal 1999 *How We Became Posthuman* argues that we cannot fully appreciate information outside of the material instantiating it. She argues rather for both an "embodied virtuality" and the "materiality of informatics."[27] These two phrases allude both to the imagined separation between information and materiality as well as the embodied processes – of recording, transmitting, disseminating information – that resist or belie this disembodiment.[28] Hayles attempts to elude the lopsided, binary power dynamics between media and user that persist in McLuhan's and Kittler's work. There is a sort of parity between media and user that emerges in her insistence on the embodiment of each.

Media Archaeologies and Histories

Hayles applies her concept of an insistently embodied media to contemporary modes and manifestations of textuality, particularly when she attends to the ways in which electronic texts do and do not mimic the experience of printed texts. Hayles' work considers the specific historicity of particular media technologies, which makes it particularly helpful for my exploration of the letter in the medieval mediascape. If the embodied materiality of media is crucial to its appreciation, the particularities of this

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[27] N. Katharine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 21.

[28] Hayles accounts for human embodiment as part of her notion of informatics: what she's arguing against is the idea that information floats around somehow separate from the bodies that convey it to one another. She also resists the idea that the modern moment is so alien from the past, but suggests that some processes of mediation are more visible to us now and some are less so. If I were to imagine how this theory would incorporate oral cultures, I think that she would argue that the human bodies that produce and exchange oral information are very much part of a materially instantiated informatics.

material embodiment are not stable across time and place but rather are instantiated within historical and social circumstances. In *Writing Machines*, Hayles defines "technotext" as a literary work that "interrogates the inscription technology that produces it, [that] mobilizes reflexive loops between its imaginative world and the material apparatus embodying that creation as a physical presence."[29] Hayles here gestures at how our assumptions about texts as materially embodied objects have shifted – and continue to shift – as a result of new media technologies as well as how the tenacious assumptions about textuality engendered by the long dominance of print media still prevail. Post-print media theories emphasize the novelty of these new technologies, situating these technologies within a history of media and mediation, retrospectively periodized by other such innovations as the printing press, the typewriter, etc.

Media theorists distinguish between the fields of media history and media archaeology in ways that clarify how scholars see the relationships between media and their users, as well as the particularities of different kinds of media. While media histories consider media as a somewhat monolithic entity – or at least a coherent set of technologies – evolving teleologically over time, media archaeologies account more precisely for the particularities of specific media forms and are particularly adept at resurrecting "dead" media as artifacts of historically constituted processes. Media archaeologies resist the evolutionary model of the history; as Siegfried Zielinski argues, "the history of the media is not the product of a predictable and necessary advance from primitive to complex apparatus. The current state of the art does not necessarily represent

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[29] N. Katharine Hayles, *Writing Machines*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 25.

the best possible state."[30] This field demands an understanding of the specifics of a particular medium's apparatus, its processes of production, as well as the social and political realities with which it engaged.

Lisa Gitelman's *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* employs media archaeology as a methodology and insists on viewing media as "denizens of the past," with Gitelman arguing that "new media are less points of systemic rupture than they are socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning as such."[31] Gitelman's historically situated explorations of technologies of reading and writing – what Zielinski terms a media *variantology* – aim to preserve the particularities of particular media forms and technologies and focus on the materiality of specific media. Her work on the machines for reading and writing in the Edison era (in her 1999 monograph, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines*) bears out these precepts, as she elucidates the textuality of these machines, arguing that the phonograph for instance can be interpreted as a "consensual, embodied theory of language."[32] Her work sees technology as enmeshed in textuality and the machines themselves as both physically and discursively constructed. The medieval letter similarly relied on historically instantiated technologies and modes of production and cannot be properly understood without accounting for them.

Letters in the Medieval Mediascape

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[30]Siegfried Zielinski. *The Deep Time of Media*, trans. Gloria Custance. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 7.

[31] Gitelman, *Always Already* New, 6.

[32] Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 21.

A medieval media archaeology takes into account the distinct technologies, processes, and materials that together produced codices, manuscripts, documents and other texts during the period. In medieval studies, this work has largely been the realm of codicologists, who have constructed histories of particular writing technologies and practices. Scholars of medieval documentary culture, the chief example being Michael Clanchy's *From Memory to Written Record*, consider the social function of documents and account for the technologies that engender them. The letter, in particular, draws together a varied array of practices and technologies, from the scribe and his tools to the messenger and his performance tactics.

Historians of medieval literacy and documentary culture have described the processes and technologies involved in the production and dissemination of letters. As Martin Camargo argues, this process was oral as well as material; the inscription would involve dictation to a scribe, the transmission entailed handing the text over to a messenger, and the reception could involve the messenger or some other actor publicly reading the letter aloud and/or the recipient reading the letter privately. This process sees reading and writing as distinct tasks, employing separate sets of technologies and actors. The letter as a form must also take into account its means of transmission. Sunka Simon, a scholar of early millennial contemporary epistolary technologies, such as email and fax, considers epistolary texts as especially attuned to the processes of inscription and transmission that produce them. Letters necessarily invoke the material circumstances that comprise their "epistolary situation," that is, the spatial and temporal distance

between the sender and recipient.[33] Similarly, the processes involved in the composition and reception of medieval letters shape the sorts of engagements its users have with the document.

Reading the *Ars Dictaminis* as Media Theory

The *ars dictaminis* treatises examine these engagements that the letter facilitates between and among its users and thus, I argue, comprise a sort of medieval media theory, explicating the multimodal interactions between the epistolary medium and its users. Several medieval *dictatores* account for the invention of the letter in terms that emphasize its status as a material object, operating in an exchange between bodies. It is the letter's physical form that allows it to cross the spatiotemporal gap between sender and recipient and it is the seal that allows it to preserve the sender's secrets from everyone but the intended recipient. These definitions account for and even emphasize the *multiple* bodies involved in an epistolary exchange. It is not only the distant bodies of the sender and recipient that are in play, but also the body of the messenger as well as that of the letter, the corporeality of which these passages highlight. These formulations encourage us to understand the medieval letter as a medium particularly identified with its own materiality.

If we read examples of the prefatory definitions of the letter in dictaminal treatises as responding to the same basic questions addressed by contemporary media theorists (i.e. What is the relationship between the media-object and its users? What sorts of agency are ascribed to each? What social, historical factors have shaped the processes of

[33] Sunka Simon, *Mail-Orders: The Fiction of Letters in Postmodern Culture*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002).

mediation?), the passages reveal striking notions about the relationships engendered by the epistolary process. Medieval media must also be understood as instantiated within their own historical, social, and cultural circumstances. Not only would attending to these material specificities help us avoid anachronistic assumptions about the logistics of medieval letter-writing – for instance, mistakenly assuming that medieval letters were autographs – but we can also see the ways in which the practices of composition and delivery shaped the theory of epistolarity itself.

Medieval letter-writing manuals, those produced in England and on the continent, theorized the letter as a material object that acts upon and through which its users act upon each others' affective, intellectual, and physical faculties. I argue that these manuals imagine a letter that does not record private, subjective experience through a monovocal text, but rather circulates meaning among its network of multiple users: the sender, the scribe, the messenger, the readers, and the listeners. The medieval letter is affective not only by virtue of its rhetoric, but also by virtue of its physical apparatus, which offers users different modes of engagement with the text and with each other.

Thomas of Capua's (d. 1239) *Ars Dictandi*, a widely diffused thirteenth century papal manual that survives in six English manuscripts, is often identified as the source for this variety of the etymological definition of the the *epistola*; although it should be noted that this definition recurs across several Italian texts such as Guido Faba's *Summa* and Conrad von Mure's *Summa de arte prosandi* (1275-76).[34] Thomas, Faba's contemporary was a papal diplomat – he served as a notary during the papacy of Pope Innocent III,

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[34] Camargo, *Medieval Rhetorics of Prose Composition*, 17.

cardinal deacon from 1212, and cardinal priest of Santa Sabina – would have "had a considerable European audience for his writing because of his Roman positions."[35]

> Est ergo epistola litteralis legatio diversarum personarum capax, sumens principium cum effectu salutis. Denominata est autem epistola ab 'epi,' quod est supra, et 'stolen,' quod est missio; inde dicitur epistola quasi supramissio, quia supra intentionem mittentis gerere videtur ministerium nuntiantis, id est elegantius et locupletius in ea mentis explicatur affectus, quemadmodum faceret aliquotiens ipse nuntians vel delegans.
>
> [So the epistle is a lettered dispatch that can contain several persons, beginning first with the effect of a greeting. It is named "epistola" from *epi* which is beyond and *stolen,* which is *missio*/sending; therefore an epistle is a "supramissio" or beyond-the-sending because the office of the messenger exceeds the sender's will. That is, his mind's disposition is explained more elegantly and fully in the letter just as he himself would do, sending or carrying forth.] [36]

The second descriptor of the letter in the first line, "*capax*" or "capacious," is one of size, which obviously suggests physicality. Moreover, the genitive phrase, "*diversarum personarum*," which depends on the adjective *capax*, ties this physicality to the document's ability to accommodate an exchange between *several,* rather than merely two, people or users. Next, Thomas introduces the etymological explanation of the Ancient Greek prefix and stem that make up the Latin word *epistola*, which becomes

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[35] James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 258.
[36] Cited in Camargo, "Where's the Brief?," 2. Translation mine.

conventional, and repeats across the dictaminal treatises. Translated into Latin, *epistola* becomes a *supramissio*, a document that exceeds its own sending; the letter is thus a document that exceeds the action of its own transmission. Thomas then refers to the contents of the letter as the sender's *affectum mentis*, or "the affection or impression or style of the mind." This term links the sender's affective and intellectual faculties, suggesting that the letter performs more work than intellectual signification. Thomas of Capua's definition thus hints at the complicated practice of epistolary transmission that historians of documentary culture, such as M. T. Clanchy, reconstruct, and this passage situates the process of transmission – which I describe as a series of mediations and remediations above – as a process in which *affect* is mediated through the text-object along with information.

The native English *dictatores* adopt and adapt this convention. I read two such adaptations of this convention: John of Briggis' *Compilacio de arte dictandi* and Thomas Merke's *Formula moderni et usitati dictamine*. Additionally, I read an example of a native English *ars dictaminis*, the *Regina Sedens Rhetorica,* that does not follow this convention and examine the ways in which the definition that it *does* provide manifests similar concerns about the letter and affect. Only one copy of the John of Briggis' *Compilacio de arte dictandi*, which was written during the first half of the fifteenth century in England, survives in six folios of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Douce 52. Camargo suggests that it was an "autonomous compilation, independent of, though related to, the material that immediately precedes it."[37] The most likely candidate for the

[37] Martin Camargo, *Medieval Rhetorics of Prose Composition: Five English Artes Dictandi and their Tradition*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 115 (Binghamton: SUNY-Binghamton Press, 1995), 89. The manuscript contains: an

author is a John Brygges, M. A., whose first mention on record is as a portionist of Merton College, Oxford, in 1380-81. He was later a fellow of Merton College in 1386, and proctor of the university in 1391-1392.[38] His etymological definition demonstrates the influence of Guido Faba during the period, as he repeats Faba's definition with very few emendations:

> Et sciendum quod epistola est missio litteralis vel libellus destinatus absenti. Et dicitur ab epy, quod est "supra," et stolon, "missio," quasi supra id quod nuncius sufficit affectum mentis declarare.
>
> [It is known that a letter is a dispatch or little book sent to one who is absent. And it is so named from epi which is "beyond" and stolon, "missio" as beyond that which the messenger is able to declare with respect to the disposition of his (i.e. the sender's) mind.][39]

Briggis' text is largely compilatory, and refers the reader to other, more authoritative sources such as Peter of Blois and Peter of Vinea, so it seems unlikely that this text would comprise the whole or even the bulk of the reader's exposure to the subject. It seems more likely that it stood as a sort of overview of dictaminal concepts. Therefore, his inclusion of these two key concepts – the letter as uniting absent friends, and the

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incomplete set of Latin definitions and commonplaces, Latin proverbs, *Epilogus mappe mundi* by Pierre d'Ailly, a treatise entitled "communis loquela linguagii latini," a treatise on rhetorical colors, dictaminal notes, largely derived from Guido Faba's *Summa dictaminis*, John of Garland on the four prose styles. The codex is clearly a compilation of rhetorically-centered educational texts.

[38] James J. Murphy, "Rhetoric in Fourteenth-Century Oxford," *Medium Aevum* 34 (1965): 15-16.

[39] Cited in Camargo, *Medieval Rhetorics of Prose Composition*, 93.

translation of *epistola* into *supramissio* – perhaps underscores their importance to the field as a whole.

Another homegrown English *dictator* sees the Thomas Merke sees the epistolary process as one that mediates signification across various bodies. Merke (d. 1409/10) is, according to Martin Camargo, the “supreme representative” of the homegrown English theoretical dictaminal tradition. A brief survey of his political career gives helpful context for his rhetorical theories. Merke was a Bachelor of Theology from 1392-3 and a Doctor of Theology by 1395. He served as Bishop of Carlisle under Richard II and was a member of Richard’s inner circle. He was included in several embassies on the king’s business, traveling to Paris to negotiate the king’s second marriage, to Cologne, to the Holy Roman Empire, and was named as both an executor and legatee in Richard II’s will. After the depoistion of Richard and accession of Henry IV, Merke was stripped of his bishopric. He retired to Oxford and taught theology from 1401 to 1406,[40] during which time Murphy suggests he composed his treatise on letter-writing.[41] His treatise, the *Formula Moderni et usitati dictaminis* survives in eleven English manuscripts, most of

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[40] R. G. Davies, “Merk, Thomas (*d.* 1409/10)” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), accessed December 7, 2015. Davies describes Merke’s treatise thus: “at some point he composed *de moderno dictamine*, (the title of the treatise in Chicago, Newberry Library, MS 55) a guide to letter-writing for apprentice estate managers, which won immediate popularity and provided sharp evidence that here was no ordinary monk-scholar.” The *Formula* however belongs to the more theoretically concerned body of *artes dictandi,* rather than the highly practical texts that would have served the business courses at Oxford, an example of which is John Sampson’s *Compilacio*.

[41] Murphy, “Rhetoric in Oxford,” 18.

Camargo suggests that the 1390s are a more likely candidate for the time of composition as given the division of labor in medieval university curriculum, it is easier to imagine “Merke teaching *dictamen* as a beginning student of theology than as a Doctor of Theology” *Medieval Rhetorics of Prose Composition*, 116.

which date from the first half of the fifteenth century. Merke largely adopts Thomas of Capua's definition for the *Formula* with some adaptation. His changes indicate an enhanced appreciation for the letter's process of transmission. He sees this process not merely as one of purely intellectual signification but also as a means of circulating affect through multiple modes of engagement with that object. Merke situates the letter as mediating a complicated nexus of human agents and their affections, or dispositions:

> Est autem epistola nedum interiorum conceptuum explanativa, verumeciam tam legencium quam audiencium animos ad explecionem voluntatis et beneplaciti mittentis allectiva.
>
> [The epistle does not explain inner thoughts, but rather entices the minds of the readers as well as the listeners to the fulfillment of the will and gracious purpose of its sender.][42]

The letter offers different roles: sender, messenger, listener, and reader; each participant fulfills a different role in this affective exchange. For example, the messenger adopts and performs the sender's will, while also engaging the minds of his listeners. This first sentence of the passage is a departure from Thomas of Capua's epistolary definition, and Camargo, the text's editor, does not identify it as derived from a particular source. We might then conclude that it is Merke's own fourteenth-century, English invention. Merke imagines the letter itself as performing the action rather than the sender acting upon the recipient *by means* of the letter; the adjectives for explaining, "*explanativa*," and enticing "*allectiva*," modify the *epistola* not the *mittens* or sender. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that *beneplaciti* is a particularly difficult word to translate into English, as the

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[42] Cited in Camargo, *Medieval Rhetorics of Prose Composition*, 122-23.

plac- stem conveys pleasure as well as purpose, renderng it a more affective term than my translation, "gracious purpose," might otherwise indicate. Merke here refers also to multiple possible modes of receiving the letter: one could read it (as a member of the *legencium*) or hear it (as a member of the *audencium*). The next section of the passage follows Capua's lead, and introduces multiple modes of epistolary transmission in addition to the multiple modes of epistolary reception:

> Dicta ab *epy*, quod est "supra," et *stolon,* "missio," quasi "supramissio," quia supra intencionem mittentis videtur gerere misterium nunciantis, eo quod ita plene in ea mentis explicatur affectus, sicut aliquociens faceret ipse nuncians vel delegans.
>
> [Named from *epy*, which is "supra - beyond" and *stolon*, "missio – a dispatch or literally the sending", as in "beyond-the-sending" because the ministery or office of the messenger seems to exceed the intention of the sender. This is because his mind's disposition is fully explained in the letter, as if sometimes he himself might do, if he were reading it aloud or carrying it forth.][43]

Merke argues that the epistola, or *supramissio*, goes beyond the transmission of the text to explicate fully the *affectus* ("will" or "impression" or "style") of the sender's mind – the document is more than a placeholder or signifier during the process of communication but performs affective work. The document and the messenger serve as each other's supplements in this affective exchange between the sender and the recipient. This formulation, wherein the letter and the messenger are two supplementary bodies, picks up on Conrad of Mure's comparison of the letter's seal to the human body. The

[43] Cited in Camargo, *Medieval Rhetorics of Prose Composition*, 122-23.

sender's *affectus mentis* is thus translated across multiple bodies during the affective exchange.

Another *ars dictaminis* treatise produced during the period considers the letter as materialized affection. The *Regina Sedens Rhetorica* was roughly contemporary with Merke's *Formula* but derives from the French rather than Italian dictaminal tradition. It exists in three manuscripts, dating to the early fifteenth century.[44] The author is unknown, but Camargo proffers a certain Simon O., an Oxford *dictator*, as the most likely candidate.[45] The treatise employs an allegorical framework with Lady Rhetoric (and her secretary Philomena) holding court and summoning her vassals. It is the only such text to devote itself entirely to this organizing fiction. Though the *Regina* works from a different tradition, we see in the definition of the epistle a similarly twinned interest in the intellectual and affective faculties of the letter's users that appears in Merke's text. This example illustrates that even when the treatise is not following the Capuan etymological definition found in the Italian treatises – such as Thomas of Capua's – letter-writing manuals composed in England during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were concerned with the letter as an affective document.

> Epistola sive littera est affectus delegantis extrincicus, quem intrincice desiderat et pro avida negocii expedicione sciat ille cui littera destinatur. Que diffinicio auctentice diffinicioni realiter correspondet.[46]

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[44] The three manuscripts: London, British Library, MS. Royal 10B.9., a large miscellany containing dictaminal and legal materials; Cambridge, Trinity College MS. O.5.4, a large volume of teaching materials; Cambridge, Trinity College MS. B.14.40, in addition to the *Regina*, this codex contains texts used in teaching French. See Camargo, *Medieval Rhetorics of Prose Composition*, 168-70.

[45] Camargo, *Medieval Rhetorics of Prose Composition*, 171-72.

[46] Cited in Camargo, *Medieval Rhetorics of Prose Composition,* 186.

> [The epistle or letter is the external affection of the sender, that which intrinsically he desires and that which for the eager arrangement of a matter the recipient should know. This definition in reality corresponds to the authorized definition.]

The *Regina* does not define the term theoretically or use the etymology to do so, but instead explains the medium through its practical function. Here the epistle consists of the sender's affection made material and external. The two verbs in the relative clause governed by *quem* – *desiderat* and *sciat* – link the users' affective and intellectual processes as the defining purposes of the letter's actions. The second sentence of this passage is a perhaps oddly defensive insistence that this theoretical definition does in fact correspond with contemporary epistolary practice. However, this might in fact suggest that the *Regina sedens Rhetorica* understands the letter as practically *affective* as well as effective document. These definitions of epistolarity do not allow for models of reading that easily separate intellect and emotion, but rather the letter works on both simultaneously. The letter requires analysis that can account for the variant models of interactions between the letter as media object and is users. Reading these definitions, then, in terms of media theory allows for a more fulsome understanding of how users encountered the letter as a medium. Media theories help us account for the various interactions that users could have with the medieval letter.

Epistolarity in Literary Texts

I argue that medieval epistolary theorists were interested in the letter not only as a pleasing arrangement of words, but also the way the document itself mediated affect and meaning among its users. It is not surprising, then, that other medieval writers were interested in the way that the letter worked and that they represented the epistolary circuit

in literary texts as an event that draws together bodies in motion. The chapters of my dissertation examine the categories of body and movement instantiated in the epistolary circuit and how literary texts construct these categories.

The bodies in question are both human and non-human. The seal, for example, is a material object that appends the epistle's textual body. The seal, in medieval theorizations thereof, became somewhat troublingly "lively," extending the physical presence of its author's human body across superhuman distances. The seal can manifest a sender's physical presence across astounding geographic distances as well as preserve and extend that presence beyond the natural temporal bounds of a human life. In this way the imagined mechanics of the seal and its relationship to its issuer's human body resonates with medieval understandings of the relic, a vestige of a saint's human body that preserves the saint's miraculous, superhuman efficacy across vast swathes of time and space. It is natural, then, that the seal becomes a salient object in hagiographical texts. The seal, I argue, replaces the relic in those hagiographies that do not depict a grisly martyrdom, wherein the saint's body demonstrates a superhuman endurance or becomes the locus of sanctifying, yet almost pornographic, violence, as well as those hagiographies that are concerned with the emergence of Christianity as a bureaucratic power.

The human body of the messenger is a locus of anxiety for both epistolary theorists and within the literary depictions of epistolarity. The letter, according to some dictaminal theorists, was invented in part in response to the unreliable, fallible faculties (cognitive and otherwise) of the messenger. Messengers might forget the contents of a message, might misunderstand them, or misrepresent them. The letter, then, is not subject

to the vicissitudes of human frailty and can more accurately represent the intentions of the sender. While the letter's textual body might be able to take on these affective and cognitive functions, it crucially lacks the mobility of a human body, hence the messenger's necessity within the epistolary circuit. In literary depictions as well as theorizations of medieval epistolarity, the messenger is both too human – that is, possessed of an independent will and corruptible human body – and not human enough, or not human in the specific way. Ideally, of course, the sender could manifest in the presence of his addressee and communicate his intentions in the addressee's sight and hearing. In lieu of this, the sender had to outsource the job to two insufficient bodies, the letter and the messenger, and hope that they together are enough. Together, they form a conjoined body of human and textual elements that just might get the job done. The messenger's excessive human faculties – those that are not strictly required to complete the epistolary circuit – emerge as cites of potential failure. For example, the messenger in Gower's "Tale of Constance" gets drunk and allows the letters in his charge to be altered, with disastrous results. The messenger's human body is also a site of vulnerability to violence. The titular hero of *Richard Coer de Lyon*, for instance, kills hostages and turns their bodies into pseudo-epistles, parodying the complementary relationship between textual and human body inherent to the epistolary circuit.

The various bodily elements of the epistolary circuit are not static but rather are in motion. Understanding the nature and implications of these movements – and the relationship they instantiate between the bodies – was an interest within medieval literary texts. The timing of the epistolary performance, its ability to capture and convey a momentous present tense, received special attention in medieval dramas. The drama uses

the messenger's body to stage this concern, using messenger characters to move the audience through temporal and geographic transitions. Epistolary pronouns can also be understood in these terms, as gesturing at a motion. The relationship between the first-person sender or author and the second-person addressee moves meaning across various embodiments. The epistolary circuit circulates the process of a letter's composition and signification across multiple bodies. The first-person pronoun is therefore also circulated across these multiple bodies. Thus, the first person pronoun might be adopted in turn by the letter's "author" (the sender, the person whose name and specific identity append the letter), the scribe who might compose and revise the text's contents, the messenger whose body bears the first person pronoun across time and space to its destination, or the reciter (who may or may not be the same person as the messenger), who recites the content, thereby performing the first person pronoun. Therefore, the first person created by an epistolary text is fundamentally relational, dependent upon the addressee, but also, the other bodies whose work facilitates the epistolary circuit.

Taken together, these chapters demonstrate that epistolarity provided medieval writers and thinkers a means of thinking through issues of textuality, embodiment, and processes of textual signification and collective meaning making. I hope to prove that reading the *ars dictaminis* as a media theory can open up readings of literary depictions of epistolarity, and that medieval epistolarity offered a way of theorizing a mode of textuality that dispersed and created meaning across a range of bodies and elements.

Chapter 1:

Body(ies) of Evidence:

Seals and Sigillography in the *Legenda Aurea* and Marie de France's "Laüstic

When the host of the party of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury entreats the Pardoner to cheer them all up after the Physician's grisly tale, the Pardoner replies, "it shal be doon… by Seint Ronyon,"[47] swearing on either St. Ronan or St. Ninian but also punning on "runnion" meaning "loins." The corrupt Pardoner, tying his invocation of a saint to a particular body part, gestures at the emphatic relationship between saints, their hagiographies, and their bodies. His subsequent prologue begins by explaining how he deploys official documents with authenticating seals as he scams the public with faux relics and falsified documents: "And thanne my bulles shewe I, alle and somme. / Our lige lordes seel on my patente, / That shewe I first, my body to warente."[48] The bulls, and perhaps even more importantly the bishop's seal that appends them, authenticate the Pardoner's subsequent performance. Moreover, he emphasizes that his body is necessary "to warente" the documents. He ties the authority of the documents and the seals to his embodied presence; they must all work together at one time, in one place. The goods he offers for sale appear to be and are sold as holy relics. He describes them thus, "reliks been they, as wenen they echoon."[49] The relics are physical remains of saintly bodies that are imagined to have a powerful effect when they interact with other bodies, according to the Pardoner. The Pardoner describes the seals on the bulls and the relics he offers as

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[47] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer,* ll. 320.

[48] Chaucer, "The Pardoner's Prologue," 335-340.

[49] Chaucer, "The Pardoner's Prologue," 349.

effective objects: the seals authenticate the Pardoner's activity by invoking the bodily presence of Church officials, and the relics – allegedly – intervene in the natural world by virtue of their connection to and extension of the holy bodies from which they are supposedly derived. This example points to an overlap between the theorization of relics and seals, and to the appearance of seals and sigillographic discourse within hagiographic texts. This chapter first examines medieval theoretical analyses of the seal, using the sealing metaphors deployed in religious texts to establish the logic of imitation and mediation on which the authority of medieval seals relied. Next, I draw parallels between the role of the seal in epistolary theory and practice, and the role of the relic within hagiographic discourse and practice in three narratives from the *Legenda Aurea* – those of the Seven Sleepers, Saint Sylvester, and Saint John the Almoner. The seals in all three hagiographies testify to and mediate the saints' sanctity. Finally, I suggest that Marie de France's *Laüstic* can be profitably read as a hagiography, and that the text maps both epistolary (particularly sigillographic) and hagiographic (particularly reliquary) discourses onto an overdetermined text.

Seals and saints operate through a similar process of imitation and mediation. Saints imitate Christ and mediate his presence through their bodily existence, while seals extend the physical presence of their owners. Conrad of Mur, a twelfth century German *dictator*, compared the relationship between the letter's contents and the seal to that between the human body and soul: "virtus verborum, que se habet ad modum anime, et sigillum, quod se habet ad modum corporis. [The force of the words, which is like the soul, and the seal which is like the body]."[50] The goal of this chapter is to investigate how

[50] cited in Martin Camargo, "Where's the Brief? The ars dictaminis and reading/writing

the force of the seal's manifestation of the letter's embodiment was instantiated within the context of late medieval English bureaucracy. Reading seals in terms of Benjamin's exploration of a work's "aura" and reproducibility, this chapter argues that medieval seals replicate the sender's bodily presence and authority across time and space and that hagiographical texts are particularly concerned with this aspect of epistolarity.

Medieval Sigillography

The medieval seal draws together several bodies as it performed its authenticating function. Not only did seals fulfill the expected role of authenticating legal documents like deeds, will, et cetera, but they also could be used to seal chests, boxes, and the like while the objects were in the hands of custodians. Paul Brand has studied legal arguments about the validity of sealed documents and shows that seals were a "necessary form of documentary validation."[51] He draws several conclusions from this survey. First, the most important step of the sealing process was not the moment at which the matrix impressed the seal, but rather the crucial moment was removal of the matrix from the wax, the witnessing of the seal's legend by neighbors, and the document's delivery to its intended recipient. This suggests that while the seal is an object of authenticating force, it did not function by itself. It worked in a performance witnessed by multiple parties. Nor could the seal be authenticated by a single authority; instead it must be authenticated by a network of various users. Furthermore, even the authentication of the seal by a network

between the lines," *Disputatio* 1 (1996): 9 and 17n.20.

[51] Paul Brand, "Seals and their context in thirteenth century England" in *Seals and their Context in the Middle Ages*, ed. Phillipp Schofield (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), 114.

of users was not enough: the document itself must mention that it has been sealed for the seal to be properly authentic. Brand shows that the authority of the seal could be generated by an even more extended network of people, as it was common for landowners to entrust their seal matrices to agents who could seal documents on their behalf. This meant that the authority and documentary identity could extend across several more human bodies.

These issues of mediation and materiality applied not only to seals, but to a broader discourse of materiality and signification in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Brigitte Bedos-Rezak articulates the necessary interdisciplinarity of sigillography, arguing that the "challenges involved in designing effective documentary forms for bureaucratic processes were very much related to larger issues, scholarly and political, concerned with the agency of mediated and material communication."[52] Seals, and the ways in which medieval thinkers posited and delineated their uses and implications, operate at the nexus of materiality and immateriality, presence and absence. Bedos-Rezak continues, "the instrumentality of documents was predicated upon a proper integration of material format, rhetorical modes, and graphic design, a system within which seals anchored the equilibrium of the whole."[53] Thus, genre, form, and medium cooperate. Any assessment of the appearance of seal discourse, or sigillography, that appears in dictaminal treatises must be considered in light of this broader discourse.

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[52] Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak "Seals and Stars: Law, Magic, and the Bureaucratic Process (Twelfth-Thirteenth Centuries)" in *Seals and their Context in the Middle Ages*. Ed Phillipp R. Schofield. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), 88.

[53] Bedos-Rezak, "Seals and Stars," 89.

Although seals are associated with documents, they should also be understood as an embodied theatrical performance. Saints and seals "mobilised the body," to use a phrase from Bedos-Rezak, and operated on a logic of imitation. [54] Not only did seals display human bodies within their iconography, but the process further incorporated the human body both in stasis and performance:

> the attachment of seals to documents was a public ceremony, often accompanied by such personal gestures of commitment as kisses, oaths, or the signing of oneself (and of the document with the sign of the cross. The sealing technique of imprinting was itself a physical affair, requiring manual labor, contact, and touch. Seal making could further involve the inclusion within the wax of hair, fingerprints, and tooth bites, dramatising a logic of referential immanence whereby seals embodied their owners[55]

In this description, we can see that sealing summoned and invoked the body at every step of the process. The person performing the sealing interacted physically with each material element – the document, the wax, and the matrix – in the process of generating a seal. This process becomes rather theatrical – relying on an audience for validation, as Brand noted above. Seals can only come to be under a specific set of circumstances and their meaning is completely dependent on their relationships to other bodies. The wax only becomes significant as it relates to a particular document and a particular matrix. In this way the seal is similar and distinct from theoretical understandings of the relic. The

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[54] Bedos-Rezak, "Seals and Stars," 89.
[55] Bedos-Rezak, "Seals and Stars," 90.

seal is effective but not miraculous: it does not work in and of itself, but only by the mutual consent of the participants in the exchange.

The authority and presence that the seal extends across time and space is reproduced through a logic of sameness. According to Bedos-Rezak, the particular mechanics of sigillography and identity are only legible when one acknowledges the differences between contemporary and medieval processes of identity formation. While in contemporary Western societies, identity is a process of individualization and varies "with time, place, and culture," this was not the case in the "medieval lexicon."[56] Rather, identity worked through a: "logic of sameness and operated by assuming a model of similarity, referring to human beings as members of an identical species, or to the person as a psychosomatic whole, a social agent identical to itself with respect to number, essence, or properties." [57] We can understand this mode of identity as particularly resonant with that used by saints in medieval hagiographies as they work through a model of similarity to Christ, aligning their acts with that exemplum and submitting their bodies to neglect and/or torture in order to emulate Christ's death. Bedos-Rezak asserts that since seals were so closely connected with this notion of identity that flourished in the eleventh and twelfth centuries – notably the period that also saw the discursive formalization of the *ars dictaminis* – seals participated in this theorization:

> Since that particular sign, the seal, which accompanied, indeed articulated, the assertion of personal identity, participated in this same logic, conceptions of the sign and the human subject appear to be closely related. Indeed, they both

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[56] Briditte Bedos-Rezake, "Medieval Identity: A Sign and a Concept," 25.

[57] Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, "Medieval Identity: A Sign and a Concept" *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 5, 1495, 23.

> operated on the basis of a newly elaborated premise of a dialogic connection between semiotics, theology, ontology, and anthropology.[58]

While her argument participates in a broader discussion of the intersections between semiotics and ontology, what is most salient for my interest in the seal is her argument that the seal operates on a model of similarity, identifying its referent (the person to whom the seal refers) as a part of a whole, identical to other members of that whole. Moreover, the seal performs this sameness across time and space – even, in the case of some of the hagiographic narratives discussed below, across divides of life and death. Seals connect two distinct discourses: hagiography and sigillography. I suggest that both discourses operate on a similar logic of embodiment and imitation, and theological texts bear this out in their use of sealing metaphors.

Considering the theoretical similarities and differences between what Benjamin terms the "aura" of a work of art and the performative significance of medieval seals is useful. The premise of Benjamin's analysis relies on a historicization of the process. His argument assumes that mass reproduction did not meaningfully determine our relationship(s) to a given work of art or to art generally before the nineteenth century at the very earliest (with the advent of the lithograph). I wonder, what if it did? How does the medieval seal, as an object of potential mass-reproduction, complicate our understanding of a work's relationship to its fixity or mobility in time and/or space?

Benjamin acknowledges that works were mechanically reproduced before the time period he primarily considers: "Historically, [mechanical reproduction] advanced intermittently and in leaps at long intervals, but with accelerated intensity. The Greeks

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[58] Bedos-Rezak, "Medieval Identity: A Sign and a Concept," 26.

knew only two procedures of technically reproducing works of art: founding and stamping. Bronzes, terra cottas, and coins were the only art works which they could produce in quantity."[59] It is quite reasonable to include the seal among these media as seals rely on the same modes of production and have similar histories. Indeed, sigillography and numismatics are often adjunct disciplines: essays on seals appear in the same edited collections as essays on coins, and so on.

The purpose of the seal is its reproducibility, its ability to transport its user's authority across time and space. This complicates Benjamin's dictum: "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."[60] Does the seal have an "aura" as Benjamin understands it? Its purpose is surely to extend and continuously perform its physical connection to its "author." The way that medieval seals were deployed metaphorically suggests that medieval thinkers anticipated and grappled with the question of the seal's ability to project or extend its user's bodily presence across time and space.

Seals were understood metaphorically as well as materially. Bedos-Rezak assembled and analyzed a corpus of seal metaphors in her monograph, *When Ego Was Imago*, and attests, "seals provided a recurrent metaphor that articulated both the dual nature of Christ and man's creation in the image of God."[61] For example, Gerhoh of Reichersberg in his commentary on a particular line in the Psalms, deploys a sealing

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[59] Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken, 1969 [1936]), 218.

[60] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 219.

[61] Bedos-Rezak, *When Ego Was Imago: Signs of Identity in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 91.

metaphor in which God is the material of the seal matrix, Christ the image engraved upon the material, and man the wax to be imprinted:

> illustra faciem tuam super servum tuum;
>
> Hanc faciem tuam illustra super me servum tuum. Tu es quasi aurea substantia, et filius tuus cum sit splendor gloriae et figura substantiae tuae, tanquam regalis aut pontificalis imago in auro purissimo exhibet se ipsum pro incorruptibili sigillo cuilibet servo suo sibi conformando se imprimens. Tuque, Pater, hoc ipsum sigillationis opus per ipsum, et cum ipso, et in ipso perficis in servis tuis eidem filio configurandis.
>
> ["Illuminate your countenance upon your servant"
>
> Illuminate this your countenance upon me your servant. You are like the gold substance and your Son would be the sheen of your glory and the shape of your material, just as the image of the pope or the king shows itself in purest gold impressing itself to mold the incorruptible seal for whichever of his servants. You, Father, perform this work of sealing upon your servants, through itself, by itself, and within itself.] [62]

This passage emphasizes the consubstantiality of the matrix through two features: the passage's reflexive language and the relationship it draws between the object and the action. The reflexive language (particularly the repetition of the pronoun) in the passage above demonstrates the interdependence of the various bodies that the process of sealing involves. Moreover, sealing appears in noun forms, but those having different valences,

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[62] *Commentarius aureus in Psalmos, xxx Patrologia Latina* 193, col.1306D-1307D; the translation is mine.

functioning as both a thing, "*sigillo*" ("seal") and a performance or process "*sigillationis*" ("sealing"). The relationship between the Son and Father is mapped onto the relationship between the material of the matrix and the image carved upon it. The image is significantly *consubstantial* with the material. The act of sealing is hereby crucially reproductive: the matrix makes a copy of itself at the point of contact with the wax, transforming the wax into a derivative of itself. This demonstrates that the logic of sameness and the reproducibility thereof is a theoretically crucial element of medieval sigillography. This passage also refers to the logic of imitation on which sealing relies – sealing reproduces the image and authority of the sender across time and space, as the faithful are meant to imitate the example of Christ and to extend the authority of God throughout time and space. This passage resonates with Benjamin's assertion that "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity."[63] However, the seal is never original. It is always already a copy, derived not from an ur-seal but from the matrix that imprinted the image on the wax, and this matrix is substantively, essentially, distinct from the seal. It is, to be a bit pedantic, not only reproducible, but always already reproduced.

The seal's relationship to reproducibility is the key function in its deployment as a theological metaphor. William of Auvergne, (ca. 1180-1249),[64] explicitly invokes this

[63] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 219.

[64] William of Auvergne was among the first Western thinkers to grapple with the philosophical works of Greek, Jewish, and Islamic thinkers, which had just been made available through Latin translations. He was a professor of theology at the University of Paris by 1225 and elevated to the episcopacy of Paris by 1228, following a contested election upon which he travelled to Rome to plead his case – successfully – to the Pope himself. His episcopacy was marred by a drunken riot by University students, which was violently suppressed by the forces of the Queen Regent, Blanche of Castile. William bungled the aftermath and the students and masters went on strike; after a rebuke from

logic of imitation in his deployment of a sealing metaphor. In this construction, nature is impressed upon, and therefore *like* divine art. It is in this logic of imitation that sigillography picks up on the central concern of hagiography – demonstrating the saints' manifestation of sanctity through the imitation of Christ, or *Imitatio Christi*. As William of Auvergne asserts:

> Ars autem divina non a rebus est, sed res ab illa, et ideo res sequuntur illam, non converso, nec ab ipsa sunt per naturalem operationem, immo per electionem liberrimam, & voluntatem imperiossisimam: si enim per naturalem operationem essent ab illa, quemadmodum sigillationes ex signaculis, et impresionibus, ordinata esset ex nec effitate ad res sigillatas et impressas per ipsam, et non posset in alia operum genera: quemadmodum sigillum et signaculum non potest in alterius modi imagines, quam sit ea, qua ipsum insculptum est, vel impressum, et hoc est quoniam non imprimit, ut vult, nec imperat materiae recipere similitudinem suam, sed imprimit, ut habet, et qualem habet imaginem.
> [Divine art does not derive from material objects, but material objects derive from it. And likewise things follow [divine art], not the other way around. Nor do they follow through natural mechanics but by the freest choice and governing will. For if they did derive from divine art by means of a natural mechanics, as a sealing from the signets or impressions thereof, the matter would necessarily be arranged according to the things sealed or imprinted through it and could not produce

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the Pope, who regretted his previous confidence in his appointee, William reinstated the striking masters. Despite his fruitful engagement with works of Jewish philosophy, William participated closely in the 1239 condemnation of the Talmud. His work resulted in the confiscation and later burning of sacred texts from synagogues.

> another kind of product. Likewise, the seal and the signet could not produce likeness of another kind than the one with which they are engraved or impressed, and this is because it does not imprint as it wills and it does not order the material to receive its likeness, but impresses the image to the extent that it carries it and of the kind of image that it has.][65]

While this description sealing focuses on the interdependence of the bodies involved, it also establishes a clear hierarchy, whereby the copies or impressions of the image only derive their authenticating power from their contact with the original body. Like Gerhoh's passage above, William plays with the terminological distinctions for various elements of the sealing process. He uses three separate terms: "*sigillatio*" (sealing) "*sigillum*" (seal) and "*signaculum*" (signet). The seals reproduce and stand in for the sender's physical presence and authority, but the imagined relationship here is not reciprocal.

The Intersections of Hagiography and Sigillography: Saintly Seals in the *Legenda Aurea*

My readings of three *vitae* from Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, the most widely distributed and read collection of saints' lives in the Middle Ages, demonstrate that examining the intersections of hagiography and sigillography produce fruitful interpretations of literary texts. Though this is not a Middle English hagiography

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[65] *De Universo, I, I, ch. 21* in F. Hotot, ed. *Opera Omnia* (Orléans-Paris; reprinted Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1963).

collection, I believe that it was of sufficient popularity and influence in late medieval England that it can be read in this context. As a Latin collection, it directly picks up the sealing language contained in the Latin dictaminal treatises. Moreover, this collection provides a sufficient cross-section of sealing examples and therefore shows us the range of functions and valences of sealing in hagiographies. The three selected texts depict distinct aspects of seals and scenes of sealing, but all emphasize the near-miraculous efficacy of the seals. The seals, like the saint's bodies, are able to transverse distances of time and space to a superhuman extent. They preserve or authenticate the content of the saint's life for disparate audiences, extending the saint's presence, much like a relic preserves the saint's active and effective bodily presence on earth after their death.[66]

Hagiography and sigillography similarly mobilize the body and deploy a logic of imitation. For example, Gratian, the 12th century Italian monk considered the father of canon law,[67] confirms this theoretical overlap between hagiographical and documentary discourses when he referred to copies of original documents as *exempla*, deploying the term that is also used to demonstrate a saint's relationship to Christ.[68] Hagiographic texts link human and textual embodiments by coupling the textual narrative of the saint's life with access to the saint's body itself. The hagiography and the relic both allow devotees

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[66] Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Late Antique Christianity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[67] See Anders Winroth, *The Making of Gratian's* Decretum, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2000).

[68] "ut autentica ipsa atque originalia rescripta, etiam ex nostra manu subscripta, non exempla eorum insinuentur [as the authentic and original text itself, actually written from our hand, are not substituted by the *exempla* of them]" cited in Bedos Rezak, "Efficacy of Signs," 206. For a further discussion of Gratian's treatment of documents, their credibility and efficacy, see Mariano Welber, *I sigilli nella storia del diritto medievael italiano*, (Milan: Giuffre, 1984).

access to the saint's mediatory presence, like the seal extends its author's presence across time and space. Discourse about the saint's body and relic have emphasized the connection between the written word and the saint's body. The seal quite literally unites the sender's or user's body with the written text, and as Brand points out above, the text must gesture at the presence of the seal in order for the seal's authenticating effect to be complete. The seal and text depend upon each other for their signification. Hagiography relies on an embodied text and a textualized body. For example, the term for the process in which the saint's relics would be moved from one site to another was *translatio*, or translation. This metaphor emphasizes the saint's body as discursively constructed. Osbern Bokenham's 1447 all female hagiographical anthology contains the lives of thirteen saints and adopts material from Jacobus de Voragine's wildly popular *Legenda Aurea* and the structure of Chaucer's fourteenth century *Legend of Good Women*. The collection centralizes the women's bodies, focusing on particular body parts for each saint. For instance, Agatha is identified, almost metonymically, with her breasts, which her torturers cut off with pincers. She denounces her torturers thus after her mutilation:

> In my soul al hool wyth-ynne
>
> Pappys I have whych from me tuynne
>
> Thou nevere shalt moune wyth no peyne,
>
> Where whytht I fostre & susteyne
>
> Al my wyttes ful dylygently[69]

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[69] Osbern Bokenham, *A Legend of Holy Women*, trans. Sheila Delany (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), ll. 8619-23.

Not only are her breasts the primary physical feature of her martyrdom, she uses them metaphorically to describe her spiritual faculties. Though she has been deprived of her physical breasts, she claims she retains "pappys" in her soul. Her embodiment becomes a way for Agatha both to perform and articulate her spirituality. The saintly body here is not just a metaphor for something spiritual but the body is the vehicle through which the spirituality is performed.

The standard hagiographical narrative emphasizes the miraculous torture or deprivation that the saint's body is able to endure. From the martyrs like Catherine of Alexandria, at whose touch the instrument of her torture shattered; to hermits like Anthony and Mary of Egypt, whose bodies persist through harsh conditions and starvation; to virgin martyrs, like Cecilia and Lucy, who maintain their bodies' imagined integrity, these saints transcend their bodies' limits, even as their bodies provide the grounds for their performed sanctity. The connection between the saints' spiritual and physical existences and the intermediary role that the relic plays between the two have become well established concerns in hagiography studies. Michael Lapidge asserts, "we should not imagine that the saints were conceived abstractly as disembodied spirits. Theirs was a physical and palpable presence: that is to say, the saint was physically present in each shrine insofar as that shrine contained a relic of his/her body – a bone, a fingernail, a lock of hair, whatever."[70] The relic is the means through which this physical, palpable presence becomes accessible. The hagiographic narrative, as a part of a saint's cultic practice, serves as a means of accessing the saint's spiritual efficacy, and therefore

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[70] Michael Lapidge, "The saintly life in Anglo-Saxon England" in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature* 2nd ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 251.

functions similarly to the relic itself. The relic – and by extension the shrine, as Robyn Malo demonstrates – is the means through which this physical, palpable presence becomes accessible.[71]

In the three selections from the *Legenda Aurea*, the saints do not leave behind bodily relics, but the seals, I argue, serve a similar function to the relic, prompting us to consider the overlapping theorizations of the two efficacious, almost animated, objects. These hagiographies do not include grisly martyrdoms from which efficacious bodily relics might emerge but are rather more concerned with the bureaucratic processes of the emerging church. The seals serve in the place of bodily relics in these texts. My readings not only demonstrate that the hagiography used epistolarity. Focusing on the seals also allows us to see how the hagiography adapted bureaucratic tools and objects within its own generic conception of textuality and embodiment. A brief survey of the three plots in question demonstrates the prominence of these rather lively seals across the hagiographies. In "The Lives of the Seven Sleepers," seals authenticate the sanctity of seven men who have escaped pagan persecution by falling asleep and awaking years and years later into a Chrstian empire. In "The Life of Saint Sylvester," the eponymous saint uses a seal to prove his efficacious sanctity, literally sealing the mouth of a dragon that was terrifying the population. In the narrative of the life of St. John the Almoner, a seal is able to cross the bounds of life and death, preserving the contents of its message across this divide. These three narratives do not depict martyrdoms, in which the saints can offer their own bodies as sites of sanctity. When a saint's body can miraculously withstand

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[71] Robyn Malo, *Relics and Writing in Late Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

damage beyond human capacity, the body becomes the vehicle through which the saint attests God's presence on earth. But for narratives that do not offer such a point of entry to this particularly hagiographic understanding of embodiment, then textual bodies or objects, like the seal, can perform that function. Reading these three texts with a focus on how the seals function like relics allows us to see how the hagiographic genre adopted an aspect of epistolarity in order to explore the relationship between objects, embodiment, reproducibility, and spiritual and textual agencies.

The Seven Sleepers

In the "Life of the Seven Sleepers" the seals are able to preserve and attest to the miraculous extension of the seven men's human lives. The text uses reproducible arts – coins and seals – to mark the passage of time and the distinction between earthly and divine authority. During the persecutions by the Roman emperor Decius, around 250 AD, seven young men were accused of following Christianity. They were given some time to recant their faith but decided instead to dispose of all their worldly goods and retire to a mountain cave to pray together, wherein they fell asleep. The emperor, seeing that their attitude towards paganism had not improved, ordered the mouth of the cave to be sealed. Before the ordeal was over, however, care was taken to preserve the narrative of the seven young Christians, as "then the ministers and two Christian men, Theodorus and Rufinus, wrote their martyrdom and laid it subtly among the stones."[72] This written narrative then connects the bodies of the saints to textual proof of their sanctity.

[72] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. Georg Theodor Graesse. (Breslau, Koebner 1845 [Reprinted Osnabruck: O. Zeller 1969]), 438.

The seal has preserved and attests the hagiographical narrative, and the seven martyrs remained preserved, suspended in the stasis of sleep, the sociopolitical environment and the political state of their religion changed around them. Decius died in 251, and many years passed during which Christianity went from being suppressed and its followers persecuted to it being the authorized religion of the Roman Empire. At some later time — usually given as during the reign of Theodosius II (408–450) — the landowner decided to open up the sealed mouth of the cave, thinking to use it as a cattle pen. He opened it and found the sleepers inside. They awoke, imagining that they had slept but one day, and sent their attendant, Malchus, to Ephesus to buy food, instructing him to be careful lest the pagans recognize and seize him. Upon arriving in the city, Malchus was astounded to find buildings with crosses attached; the townspeople for their part were astounded to find a man trying to buy food with old coins, stamped with the face of the long dead Decius.[73] The coins, stamped by the state authority contemporary with their creation, do not maintain their authority across time and space, a pointed contrast with the seals, which effectively attest and preserve the saint's narrative from one sociohistorical moment to a vastly different one. The townspeople brought Malchus before the bishop and the consul and bid him to explain how he came in possession of such ancient coins. Malchus, at a loss as to how to prove his identity, led the suspicious bishop and consul to the cave where his companions had slept the years away. By lucky chance, they found the sealed letters left by Theodorus and Rufinus. Their encounter with the material is rendered thus:

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[73] Benjamin argues that coins were the only works of art produced by mechanical production in the ancient world. I suggest that seals work similarly.

> Et ingressus est primo Malchus ad socios suos et post eum episcopus ingrediens invenit inter lapides litteras sigillatas duobus sigillis argenteis. Et convocato populo legit eas et audientibus et admirantibus cunctis. Et videntes sanctos Dei sedentes in spelunca et facies eorum tamquam rosas florentes procidentes glorificaverunt Deum. Statimque episcopus et proconsul miserunt ad Theodosium imperatorem rogantes, ut cito veniret et miracula Dei nuper ostensa videret. [Malchus first approached his companions and the Bishop, entering after him, found among the stones the letters sealed with two silver seals. He called the people together and read them to those both listening and watching. And seeing the Lord's saints sitting in the cave and their countenances blooming like roses, they fell before them and glorified God. At once, the bishop and proconsul sent to the emperor, beseeching that he should quickly come and see the miracle.][74]

The text takes care to mention the two silver seals, which have the effect of authenticating and preserving the texts that explain the mysterious turn of events. It is also significant that the Bishop opens and reads the letters in front of both the sleepers and the consul, as they can witness and attest the letters' official "delivery." This corresponds with Brand's assertions about the performativity of medieval practices of sealing. After the hagiographical narrative of the sleepers is verified through this performance, the bishop and consul send for the Emperor so he too can witness the miracle. The Emperor arrives at the cave and all are appropriately overwhelmed with emotion. The seven sleepers, with their sanctity verified by witnesses and preserved in text, promptly die. The Emperor bids that the cave be adorned with precious stones as

[74] Jacobus de Voragine, "The Seven Sleepers," 438.

testament to their miraculous resurrection. The *Legend of the Seven Sleepers* is thus bookended by effective, authorizing documents.

The letters are used as tools, and work like relics to verify the events of the legend as miraculous phenomena. Interestingly, the seals mimic the work of the coins in the tale: while the coins initially imperil poor Malchus, they provide testamentary evidence for the hagiography, dating their initial slumber to the reign of Decius. The coins link the participants to one sociohistorical moment, while the seals transverse these sociohistorical contexts, maintaining the narrative consistently across the centuries. The seals likewise ensure that the letters have been not been opened since their composition, allowing them to be unsealed and read for the first time by the bishop and consul and witnesses. This performance ensures that the narrative they contain is considered by the witnesses to be genuine. The seals and coins work together – even as they have different relationships to temporality – as objects that verify the hagiographical narrative. Paying attention to the ways the seals work shows us how hagiographical texts use objects – even those that would not normally count as relics – in concert with textuality as efficacious, testamentary tools.

Saint Sylvester and the Dragon

In the narrative of Saint Sylvester, the seal is established as a particularly efficacious tool of Christian bureaucracy. Therefore, looking at the seal allows us to see how hagiographies incorporate bureaucratic, epistolary objects within their arsenal of effective, miraculous objects. Rather than preserving and verifying the hagiography over a vast temporal distance, this seal is effective at the same time as and within the saint's miraculous activity on earth. Saint Sylvester is able to use a sail to actually work his

miracle and thereby achieve the conversion of his particular audience. Saint Sylvester's hagiography appears less frequently in English manuscripts, but his appearance in the *Legenda Aurea* deploys sealing in such a vivid and strange way that it bears close analysis. A brief summary of his life shows us how the miraculous efficacy is rendered bureaucratically. Sylvester served as Pope Sylvester I from 314 to his death in 335. While he filled the See of Rome during a formative moment in the institutional history of Christianity, little is known of his biography from contemporary sources. During his pontificate, Constantine founded the great churches of Rome – for example, the Basilica of St. John Lateran, Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, Old St. Peter's Basilica –and cemeterial churches were built on the graves of several martyrs. Peter Brown mentions this transformation of graves into places of worship and the incorporation of dead bodies and their places of rest within the city limits as one of the culturally transformative features of this period of Christian history.[75] Brown asserts that the incorporation of the graves and dead bodies within the city radically shifted society's collective relationship to embodiment. The figure of Sylvester is mostly mentioned in terms of his imagined – sometimes fictionalized – relationship with Constantine. In the fiction, Sylvester cured the Emperor Constantine of leprosy. The Emperor, abjectly grateful, confirmed the bishop of Rome as superior to other bishops and, in a display of submission to the Church, walked before Sylvester's horse holding its bridle like a groom. Constantine, then left for Constantinople, leaving Rome to Sylvester.[76] This historical and biographical background is useful to my interpretation of the seal in Sylvester's hagiography as it

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[75] Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 5-10.

[76] See Norman Cantor, *The Civilization of the Middle Ages,* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994) 177.

helps us see the role of early Christian bureaucracy and documentary culture as a tool of conversion.

The seal in this narrative works to bring about and cement the conversion of the people of the city, offering the seal as a tool of the ascendant documentary culture. The episode of Sylvester's life that invokes sealing occurs after the conversion of Constantine, when the newly Christianized city of Rome is being threatened by a dragon, who lives in a pit and consumes over thirty men a day (as is reported to Constantine, "ille draco, qui est in fovea, postquam fidem Christi recepisti, plus quam trecentos homines quotidie interficit flatu suo [this dragon, who is in the pit, has killed more than thirty men a day with his breath since you received the faith of Christ])."[77] Constantine relies on his trusty Pope, Sylvester, who rids the city of the evil dragon through the clever deployment of a seal. After the emperor is beset with requests for help ridding the city of the troublesome dragon, Constantine summons Sylvester and instructs him to deal with the problem. Sylvester responds, "Ego per Christi virtutem eum ab omni cessare laesione faciam [Through the power of Christ, I will make him cease all of his harmfulness.]"[78] After promising to solve the problem, Sylvester searches for a solution. Like any good priest facing a conundrum, Sylvester turns to prayer.

> Orante autem Silvestro Sanctus Spiritus ei apparuit dicens: "Securus ad draconem descende tu et duo presbyteri, qui sunt tecum, cumque ad eum veneris, eum taliter alloquaris: 'Dominus noster Iesus Christus de virgine natus, crucifixus et sepultus, qui resurrexit et sedet ad dextram patris, hic venturus est iudicare

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[77] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, 78.

[78] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, 79

> vivos et mortuos. Tu ergo Satana, eum in hac fovea, dum venerit, exspecta.' Os autem eius ligabis filo et anulo crucis habente signum desuper sigillabis. Postea ad me sani et incolumes venietis et panem, quem vobis paravero, comedetis." [When Sylvester was praying, the Holy Spirit appeared to him saying, "Go safely down to the dragon with the two priests who are with you and when you come to him, address him thus: 'Our Lord is Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified and buried, resurrected and seated at the right hand of the Father; He will come here to judge the living and the dead. You, Satan, await him here in this pit.' You will tie his mouth with thread and seal over it with seal from a signet ring bearing a cross. Afterwards, safe and unharmed, you will come to me and eat bread, which I will provide for you.][79]

Here the Holy Spirit instructs Sylvester to stop the dragon's harmful oral emissions with the symbolic tools of documentary bureaucracy. The passage emphasizes the act of sealing and the impression upon the dragon's countenance of a sign of the cross as the key to the dragon's destruction. The implication at the beginning of the passage above is that the dragon has come about as a response and threat to the newly aligned regimes of church and state, as the dragon's appearance is tied to Constantine's conversion to Christianity. The task of ridding the city of the dragon itself is then a work of protecting the new bureaucracy. The dragon is terrorizing the population with his non-verbal orality, his breath, ("flatu suo"), and while Sylvester does meet this threat with his own oral speech, a modified snippet of the Nicene Creed, he is instructed to stifle the dragon with tools of textuality, and namely bureaucratic textuality, the seal and the thread affixing it.

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[79] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, 79.

While the Holy Spirit's instructions to Sylvester are in direct speech, the narration of Sylvester carrying out is task is abbreviated and indirect:

> Descendit itaque Silvester cum duobus presbyteris in foveam per gradus CL duas secum ferens laternas. Tunc draconi praedicta verba dixit et os ipsius stridentis et sibilantis, ut iussus fuerat, alligavit.
>
> [Sylvester and the two priests then went down the 150 steps into the pit carrying two lanterns with them. He spoke the prescribed words to the dragon and bound the mouth of the shrieking and hissing dragon, as he had been bid.][80]

Sylvester here uses both speech ("praedicta verba") and textual tools to bind the mouth of the dragon. The dragon's mouth was the source of terror for the population, and the threat that Sylvester faces, and it is significant that this threat is construed as unintelligible orality. Even at the point of Sylvester silencing and defeating the dragon, the dragon's oral emissions are still described as non-verbal ("stridentis et sibilantis"). This has the effect of opposing the dragon's threatening orality to Sylvester's use of textuality.

Sylvester's miracle deployed the tools of the nascent Christian bureaucracy to vanquish an unintelligible foe. Moreover, as is crucial for any effective display of the powers of a united state and church, Sylvester's miracle was witnessed and achieved the conversion of the population:

> et ascendens invenit duos magos, qui eos secuti fuerant, ut viderent, si usque ad draconem descenderent, ex draconis foetore paene mortuos. Etiam eos secum adduxit incolumes atque sanos, qui statim cum multitudine infinita conversi sunt sicque Romanorum populus a duplici morte liberatus, scilicet a cultura daemonis

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[80] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, 80.

> et veneno draconis. Tandem beatus Silvester morti appropinquans clerum de tribus admonuit, scilicet ut inter se caritatem haberent, ecclesias suas diligentius gubernarent et gregem a luporum morsibus custodirent.[81]
>
> [Climbing back out of the pit, he found two magi[82], who had followed him to see if he went all the way down to the dragon, near dead from the dragon's breath. He led those with him safe and sound, who were immediately converted in large number, and thus the people of Rome were saved from a double death, from the worship of demons and from the dragon's poison. Finally, blessed Sylvester, approaching death, warned the clergy to have charity among themselves, govern their churches diligently, and shepherd their flock from wolf bites.][83]

The conclusion to the hagiography emphasizes the miracle's effect as a tool of converting the populace, ensuring the success of Constantine's union with the church. The seal, then, is positioned as a crucial element in the bureaucratic work of the Church and in the spread of the Church to new populations. As with the "Legend of the Seven Sleepers," the seal is the central authenticating object in a bureaucratic performance. Sylvester receives a message from the Holy Spirit, and then, functioning like both a messenger and a clerk, delivers the message and seals it upon the dragon's mouth. Moreover, the image on the seal is the crucifix, the symbol of Christ's human embodiment, so the seal's invocation of embodiment is doubled here. Seals, generally speaking, extend the presence of their users across time and space, this seal in particular evokes Christ's incarnation to

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[81] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, 81.

[82] The term "magos" for the witness, is interesting here, as it posits the witnesses to the miracle as practitioners of a competing spiritual tradition, and the magic possibly practiced by the "magi" in opposition to the miracle achieved by Sylvester.

[83] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, 81.

deflate the dragon's threat to the expansion of Christianity in Rome. Not only does the seal destroy the dragon and his threatening presence, but the performance of the sealing and its miraculous dragon-vanquishing achieves the conversion of even more Romans: "qui statim cum multitudine infinita conversi sunt."[84] Focusing on the seal and reading it in terms of dictaminal precepts and its contemporary theorizations allow us to see how hagiography as a genre expanded its conception of interconnected textuality and embodiment to incorporate the tools of Christian bureaucracy.

St. John the Almoner and a "Zombie" Seal

The third example of sealing in the *Legenda Aurea*, that of St. John the Almoner, depicts an instance of personal epistolary correspondence, rather than a bureaucratic performance. Nevertheless, the depiction of the seal here emphasizes its miraculous efficacy, as the seal is able to preserve the contents of a confession across the boundaries of life and death. St. John the Almoner was born on Cyprus into a noble family. He was briefly married, and when his wife and child died, he entered religious life. His hagiography in the *Legenda Aurea* collects snapshots of the saint's good deeds: the beggars to whom he gave bread, the cruel rich man he humbled, and so on. He performed his final good deed, shriving a sinful woman through an epistolary exchange, only a short time before his death when he could sense his own mortality. A woman who has committed an unknown sin (remarkably, the nature or particulars of this sin are never disclosed in the narrative) came to John begging to be forgiven:

> Ante autem paucos dies quam moreretur, cum quaedam mulier quoddam flagitiosissimum peccatum commisisset et nulli unquam confiteri auderet, dixit ei

[84] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, 82.

> sanctus johannes, ut saltem illud scriberet, eo quod scribere sciebat, et sigillatum ei afferret et ipse pro ea oraret;
>
> [A few days before St. John died, a certain woman who had committed a particularly flagrant sin and had yet dared confide in no one came to him. St. John told that should she write her crime down and bring it sealed to him, he would pray for her.][85]

While confession is typically a verbal process, in which one relays one's misdeeds orally to a qualified listener, the sinful woman is either so afraid or ashamed of this oral disclosure that John provides an alternative method: epistolarity. Thus, John has substituted a particular textual medium, epistolarity, for an oral confession. The woman does as she is bid, "cui illa assensit et peccatum scribens diligenter sigillavit et beato Johanni tradidit [She agreed to this and carefully writing out her sin, she sealed it and brought it to St. John]."[86] While the substitution of epistolarity for an oral confession seems so effective that the text offers no further comment on it, the permanence of the text and its ability to wander outside the control of its intended recipient cause the sinful woman acute anxiety after the death of St. John:

> Sed post paucos dies beatus Johannes infirmatus in domino requievit: illa ut audivit illum defunctum, se vituperatam et confusam putavit credens, quod scriptum alicui commisisset et ad manum alterius devenisset.
>
> [But after a few days, St. John grew sick and died. When she heard that he had passed, she was troubled and believed she was to blame – she thought he may

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[85] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea,* 129.

[86] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea,* 130.

> have sent the writing to someone or it had otherwise come into someone else's hand.][87]

The sinful woman has written a letter to no one confessing her sin, in the hopes that she would be forgiven. She has delivered it, sealed, under the expectation that it would not be opened, but would somehow achieve her salvation. Once the person to whom she had delivered it is no longer alive, however, she fears for the safety of this damning object, which contains a first-person narrative of her sinful behavior. The woman's situation here is a bit ironic: in attempting to avoid the shame of an oral disclosure of her sin, she entrusted the contents to a sealed letter. However, a letter, as a physical object, can travel across greater distances of time and space than an oral speech, and has preserved her sin for a potentially unintended audience. Frantic with worry about sin being disclosed, the woman heads to John's graveside and disturbs his eternal rest with her fretting:

> Ad tumulum igitur sancti Johannis accessit et ibi uberrime flens clamabat dicens, "heu putans confusionem vitare confusio omnibus facta sum." Cumque amarissisme fleret et beatum Johannem rogaret, ut sibi ostenderet, ubinam scriptum suum dimisisset, ecce beatus Johannes in habitu pontificali de tumulo processit, duobus episcopis, qui secum quiescebant, hinc inde vallatus, dixitque mulieri: cur nos tantum infestas et me et sanctos ipsos, qui mecum sunt, quiescere non permittis? Ecce stolae nostrae lacrimis tuis omnes madefactae sunt. Porrexitque sibi scriptum suum sigillatum, ut prius fuerat, dicens ei: vide sigillum hoc et aperi scriptum tuum et lege; quod illa aperiens peccatum suum omnino deletum invenit, et ibi taliter scriptum reperit: propter Johannem servum meum

[87] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, 132.

> deletum est peccatum tuum, sicque illa immensas Deo gratias retulit et beatus Johannes cum aliis episcopis in monumentum rediit.
>
> [So she went to St. John's tomb and there began to weep bitterly and cry out, "Alas! I am entirely shamed, believing my shame is known by all!" She wept bitterly and beseeched the blessed John to show her where he had left her writing. Lo and behold, St. John came out of the tomb in pontifical robes, along with two bishops who had been at rest alongside him. Arrayed thus, he approached the woman and said: "Why are you disturbing me and these holy ones so? Why won't you let us rest? Look, our garments are soaked with your tears!" Then he presented her writing – still sealed as it was before. He told her, "Look at this seal! Open your own writing and read it." She then opened it and found that her sin was entirely erased and she found this writing therein: "Your sin has been erased on account of John, my servant." She rendered her profound thanks to God, and St. John returned to his tomb with the other bishops.][88]

She approaches the grave, the last known location of the body unto whom she had delivered her sealed letter, and frets over the potential vulnerability of her letter, which might lead to the disclosure of her sin. St. John is somehow able to hear her grousing and comes before her decked out in the robes of an ecclesiastical, bureaucratic authority, along with witnesses who demonstrate similar modes of authority. He berates the woman for disturbing his final slumber and not trusting him as a safe haven for her epistolary sin. The seal is the object that verifies the entire exchange here: it remains intact even as it seemingly departs the world and returns. The seal is the object that allows the woman to

[88] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, 134.

convey her sin safely to St. John and then to identify it confidently as her own. The miracle in this instance is that the sinful woman's first-person epistolary narrative of her sin has been replaced ("deletum est") with what we can presume is God's own epistolary narrative. The speaker has somehow divined the contents of the letter and replaced the woman's words with his own. The seal maintains its integrity across the divide between earthly and supernatural realms. It thus functions in this hagiography as a relic might, as the tangible matter that sanctifies the exchange.

Laüstic and an Epistolary Reliquary

My final example is not at first glance a hagiography, nor are the sigillographic aspects readily apparent. However, the two discourses intersect within this generically flexible text in a way that reflect the same concerns about mediation that manifest in the texts from the *Legenda Aurea* above. This suggests that when epistolarity encounters hagiography, or hagiography encounters epistolarity, the seal is their discursive meeting point. In Marie de France's Laüstic, the eponymous nightingale becomes a means of communication between the two lovers, thus transforming into a letter and establishing an epistolary circuit, and as it does so, the text picks up several of the concerns of the *ars dictaminis*; upon the nightingale's cruel murder, its body is sealed into a reliquary. This text is also not in English, but Anglo-Norman; however, it was written and circulated in England, and therefore is still situated within and responds to English documentary culture. The principle of its inclusion here is that it demonstrates the flexibility of both hagiography and sigillography as discourses within literary texts. The two discourses, hagiography and sigillography, are thus mapped onto an over-determined text-object of the nightingale's body.

The opening of the poem establishes the linguistic multivalence of the nightingale; I suggest that this multivalence extends to the various objects into which the nightingale is transformed, or perhaps translated – as a relic might be – over the course of the poem. The poem begins:

Une aventure vus dirai,	An adventure I will tell you
Dunt li bretun firent un lai;	Which the Bretons made into a lai
Laüstic ad nun, ceo m'est vis,	Laustic, by name, so I've heard,
Si l'apelent en lur païs;	So they call it in Brittany;
Ceo est russignol en franceis	It's called "Rossignol" in French
E nihtegale en dreit engleis.[89]	And "Nightingale" in good English.

In this passage, both the bird and the narrative under discussion serve exclusively as the object of the actions. The text and the bird are thus equated; the bird is rendered as text from the outset of the poem. Moreover, the name – or the signification – of the bird changes depending on who is handling it. As the nightingale ends the tale as an overdetermined text-object, the bird here is here overburdened with possible translations. Critics have used this opening to discuss Marie's interest in translation and comparisons between genres, and paying attention to sealing and reliquary discourse in the poem allows us to see how Marie incorporated objects into her preoccupation with literary and textual transformations.

Marie de France's *Laüstic* is a Breton lai the plot of which self-consciously adopts several features of the hagiography. One of Marie's shortest lais, the plot is deceptively

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[89] Marie de France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, ed. Claire Waters (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2018), ll. 1-6.

simple. Two knights live in adjoining properties: one married, the other a bachelor. The wife of the married knight conducts an emotional affair with the bachelor knight, rising at night ostensibly to hear the nightingale sing but actually to converse with her lover. They converse and share small gifts through a window in the high wall separating their respective properties. The lady's husband grows suspicious of her late-night vigils and plans a cruel prank.[90] He has his servants coat the tree branches with lime and place nets on the ground. Having captured the poor nightingale, he brings it to his wife and brags that he had solved the problem of her sleepless nights. Then he breaks the bird's neck in front of her and throws its lifeless body at her, staining her chemise with blood. After her husband leaves, she mourns the bird and her relationship with the neighboring knight:

"lasse," fet ele, "mal m'estait!	"Alas!" she said, "it is all awry!
Ne purrai mes la nuit lever	I can no longer rise at night
Ne aler a la fenestre ester,	Nor go stand at the window
U jeo suil mun ami veer.	To see my dear one, as I used to.
Une chose sai jeo de veir:	One thing I know is true:
Il quidera ke jeo me feigne;	He will think me false;
De ceo m'estuet que cunseil preigne.	I must puzzle this out.

[90] The cruel husband could be read as a sort of stand in for Ovid, or an Ovidian sense of humor. His humor operates at the nexus of sex and violence: he murders the object of his wife's affection and then stains her nightgown with blood. The nightingale, of course, invokes the tale of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela, and the hint of sexual violence by the bloodstain left by the dead nightingale on the lady's undergarment is thus intensified. Michelle Freeman suggests that the nightingale's broken body, which ends the relationship between the lady and the neighboring knight, invokes Philomela's severed tongue, which ended her ability to speak. See Michelle Freeman, "Marie de France's Marie de France's Poetics of Silence: The Implications for a Feminine Translatio", PMLA, 99 (5): 860–883, 1984.

Le laüstic li trametrai,	The nightingale I will send him
L'aventure li manderai."[91]	The story I will tell him.

During their courtship, the couple substituted the bird for verbal communication, so it is fitting that the bird's lifeless body stands in here as a final envoy between them. Moreover, the last two lines have matching syntax, linking the two direct objects (*laüstic*, "nightingale," and *aventure*, "story") and the two verbs (*trametrai,* "I will send," and *manderai*, "I will tell"). Thus, not only does the bird stand in for the narrative, but the action of its sending is also linked to the telling of the tale. Both verbs serve as the ending of the lines and make the rhyme work, so both occupy the same position syntactically and rhythmically. After formulating her plan, the lady prepares the bird for sending in an especially epistolary fashion:

En une piece de samit,	In a piece of samite,
A or brusdé e tut escrit,	Embroidered in gold and inscribed all about
Ad l'oiselet envolupé.	She enveloped the wee bird.
Un sun vatlet ad apelé,	She called to her servant,
Sun message li ad chargié,	Entrusted him with her message
A sun ami l'ad enveié.[92]	And sent him to her beloved.

The nightingale as message becomes literally enveloped in a luxurious wrapping, enclosed in text, which Robyn Malo emphasized was a crucial aspect of the reliquary. We are told the wrapping is inscribed all over, but as is consistent with the rest of the tale, the actual words are missing. The object therefore stands in for the narrative. Also notable

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[91] Marie de France, "Laüstic" ll. 121-29.

[92] Marie de France, "Laüstic" ll.130-36.

here is the role of the messenger – whose role within the epistolary exchange the *ars dictaminis* treatises often track. Not only does the passage mention the servant's role at the outset of the epistolary exchange between the two lovers, but his role in the transmission and delivery of the text-object is also documented:

Cil est al chevalier venuz;	The servant came to the knight
De part sa dame dist saluz,	Greeted him on behalf of his lady
Tut sun message li cunta,	Recounted all of her message,
Le laüstic li presenta.	And presented the nightingale to him.
Quant tut li ad dit e mustré	When he had been told and shown all
E il l'aveit bien escuté,	And had heard it well,
De l'aventure esteit dolenz;	He grieved at the tale;[93]

The messenger is here not merely a passive receptacle for the lady's message – a means merely of moving the text-object across a physical distance – but he actively aids in its transmission. The messenger is accorded no fewer than four active verbs to describe his role: *venuz*, (came) *dist saluz* (greeted), *cunta*, (recounted), and *presenta* (presented). As with "tramerai" and "manderai" in the earlier passage, the verbs all occupy the final position in the back-to-back lines, linking the actions syntactically and within the rhyme scheme. Thus, the messenger's travel across the (admittedly short) time and space, his greeting to the recipient, his presentation of the text-object, and his supplementary verbal explanation are all emphasized and tied together. The nightingale is the most heavily symbolic object within the exchange and comes to represent the entirety of the exchange.

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[93]Marie de France, "Laustic" ll. 141-8.

The multimodal reception of the epistolary object is also described: the knight is told (“*diti*”), is shown (“*muster*”), and hears (“*escute*”) the exchange. This multimodal reception is also emphasized within the *ars dictaminis* treatises, as they describe the audience as both viewing and listening to the epistolary exchange. After the epistolarity of the exchange has been thoroughly flagged and stressed, the nightingale is then turned into another symbolic text-object: a reliquary.

Mes ne fu pas vileins ne lenz.	But he was neither villainous nor lazy
Un vasselet ad fet forgeér;	He had a vessel forged
Unques n'i ot fer në acer:	Not of iron or steel:
Tut fu de or fin od bones pieres,	But entirely of gold and good stones
Mut precïuses e mut cheres;	Very precious and very dear;
Covercle i ot tresbien asis.	The lid was well fitted.
Le laüstic ad dedenz mis;	He placed the laüstic within it,
Puis fist la chasse enseeler,	Then sealed up the reliquary
Tuz jurs l'ad fet of lui porter.	And carried it with him the rest of his

days.[94]

As with the nightingale’s transformation into a letter, the passage carefully tracks the components and materials involved. For my purposes, the most important word in this passage is *enseeler* (to seal), which provides the physical link between the letter as object and the reliquary as object. The nightingale is sealed as a letter would be and also sealed as a reliquary would be, allowing it to occupy both roles in this construction of overloaded textuality.

[94] Marie de France, “Laüstic” ll. 151-160.

Marie de France's interest in linguistic, literary, and textual transformations has been a focus of scholarship, as her characters often change form in some way, from the werewolf narrative of Bisclavret to the knight who transforms into a bird in Yonec. We can see that transformation and translations are also concerns of "Laüstic" from the prologue, which translates the title into several languages and contexts. Paying attention to the traces of reliquary and sigillographic discourse in the text allows us to see how this works with a textual object, rather than a sentient body. The lifeless body of the nightingale does not stop signifying, even when it has been transformed from animal to corpse by the cruel husband. We can see how he process of its signification draws together multiple actors – the sender, recipient, and messenger – and discourses, as the corpse goes from serving as a letter to serving as a relic. In trying to communicate the love the star-crossed lady and knight have for one another, the pair use interpretive tools at their disposal, and rather than refuse categorization, they wrap their love, and the nightingale, in as many interpretive frameworks as possible.

Conclusion

Hagiography is a genre whose protagonists are understood to mediate divinity through their physical bodies. The saints translate divinity into objects such as relics, as a hagiographic text translates these miraculous phenomena into narrative. As Eugene Thacker puts it, "mysticism concerns the communication with or mediation of the divine; yet, with its emphasis on divine unity, mysticism also tends toward the breakdown of communication and the impossibility of mediation."[95] Thacker's analysis – though it

[95] Eugene Thacker, "Wayless abyss: Mysticism, mediation, and divine nothingness" *postmedieval* 3.1 (2012): 81.

perhaps conflates several modes of spiritual engagement and devotion into the term "mysticism" – touches a critical nerve in hagiography studies. The saints are commonly discussed as intercessors, and the prefix of this term gestures at the between-ness of this function. If we employ Thacker's paradigm, we can see that hagiographic texts thus implicitly explore both the potential and the limits of mediation. These three legends use their intratexts to perform this self-reflection. Laustic, the pseudo-hagiographical lai, posits the nightingale as it transforms into epistolary text and then reliquary object as participating in several distinct mediations, translating an event across various transformations of its body.

But it is not just text or abstractions that the hagiographies see as mediation; rather, the materiality of each particular hagiographic medium structures the work it can do. As the passages above demonstrate, the legends pay special attention to this materiality. Thacker's analysis is again useful, as he claims, "mysticism is also indelibly material, though often a materiality without object, in that the body of the mystical subject becomes the medium through which a range of affects – from stigmata to burning hearts – eventually consumes the body itself."[96] Thacker thus touches on a question inherent to relics discourse – that thingness itself can invoke the immaterial divine. What media studies helps us to understand is that materiality works by structuring the responses that a particular medium can provoke from its users. We can also understand from this that hagiographies produce a network of related documents, objects, and practices that all purport to mediate a sacred presence through a physical object. The legends discussed above all refer to these other texts, pointing the reader or listener to this

[96] Thacker, "Wayless abyss," 81.

body of media that they can pursue and thereby participate in the signification of the saints' cult. I have suggested that when hagiography and epistolarity collide, they often do so at the seal, so to speak. The seal, like the poor nightingale, becomes an overladen text-object, absorbing the various modes of textuality and embodiment that the texts invoke into its form.

Chapter 2

Vulnerable Epistolary Bodies:

Romances of State and the Messenger's Body

It is easy for the modern reader to dismiss or to underestimate the role of the messenger in the epistolary exchange and to see the messenger as merely a facilitator of the communication between sender and recipient. However, the medieval messenger was an essential epistolary element and participated actively in the signification of the letter. In medieval romances that stage the establishment of or conflict between states, diplomatic epistolarity becomes a means through which states can articulate their idea of themselves and of their relationship with allies or rival states. Reading these scenes in light of epistolary discourse demonstrates the significance of the messenger to the genre's constructions of embodiment and textuality.

This chapter examines several scenes of diplomatic epistolarity within such romances of state. I use posthumanist theories to offer my notion of the epistolary circuit, the process through which meaning is circulated across and through the multiple human and non-human bodies in the composition, transmission, and delivery of the letter. In both the *Alliterative Morte Arthur* and *Richard Coer de Lyon*, the conventions of epistolary diplomacy are parodically exaggerated. The conjoined product of bodies and texts involved in the exchange of messengers and texts between heads of state become a locus upon which one participant enacts violent dominance over the other. In *Silence* and *Bevis of Hampton* the titular protagonists allow their bodies to become enmeshed into the

diplomatic epistolary circuit and therefore vulnerable to the messages they carry. In Gower's "Tale of Constance" from the *Confessio Amantis*, the messenger's human body offers a site of frailty, one that malefactors can use to distort the message. The messenger becomes a figure of problematic embodiment and textual agency. Reading the scenes of epistolarity in these texts shows us how romance as a genre constructed national identities and attended to the processes of statecraft through the interdependence of textuality and embodiment.

Historians of medieval literacy and documentary culture have emphasized the complex web of technologies and actors involved in the production and dissemination of letters. This process was a series of mediations and remediations, in which the content was translated into and across various media, as the letter moved from the time and place of its composition to that of its reception. Demonstrating epistolarity's multimodality, letter-writing was oral as well as material: one would likely compose the message to a scribe and possibly a notary specially trained in the *ars dictaminis*, who would not only transcribe the message but reinterpret it according to dictaminal precepts. A messenger would then carry the sealed physical document to its recipient, whereupon the process would be reversed.[97] As Camargo attests, the "private reading of a written text was not the normal mode of reception for medieval letters."[98] Upon arrival, the messenger or some other party would recite the letter publicly for an audience. The messenger might

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[97] M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307.* 2nd edition, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 89-90.

[98] Martin Camargo, "Where's the Brief? The *ars dictaminis* and reading/writing between the lines," *Disputatio* 1 (1996): 4.

then supplement the letter by answering questions about the message or providing additional, confidential information that they deliver privately and orally to the recipient.

While letter writing manuals of the period largely and expectedly focus on the content and format of the document itself, rather than the scene of its reception, the treatises – both those by English authors like Thomas Merke or those dictaminal treatises imported from the continent, often from Bologna, that circulated widely in England – often provide a prefatory definition of the epistle that accounts for it as a material object that functions in this communicative exchange among and across bodies. These prefaces offer theorizations of the letter's mediation, its ability to engender interactions between it and its users as well as to modify the interactions among those users. The many bodies involved in this exchange constitute a circuit of continuous mediation.[99]

Medieval guides to letter writing often mentioned the messenger explicitly, showing how integral the figure of the messenger was to medieval theorization of the letter and to the epistolary circuit. Guido Faba, a 12th century *dictator*, includes such a discussion in his letter writing manual, the *Summa dictaminis*, which, according to Martin Camargo, circulated widely in England.[100] Faba's three explanations for the invention of the letter (concealing secrets, serving as a mnemonic aid for a potentially dull messenger, and uniting absent friends) gestures at the letter's material form, as well as its dependence

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[99] The term "circuit" here gestures to Jeffrey J. Cohen's the relationship between human, animal, and technology in the "assemblage" of the armored knight on horseback. See, Jeffrey J. Cohen "The Inhuman Circuit" in *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, ed Jeffrey J. Cohen and Gail Weiss (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 172.

[100] Martin Camargo, *Medieval Rhetorics of Prose Composition: Five English Artes Dictandi and their Tradition*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 115 (Binghamton: SUNY-Binghamton Press, 1995), 89.

upon and extension of the messenger's body. He describes the reasons for the letter's genesis, the first being the preservation of secrets:

> Epistola fuit inventa duabus de causis. Prima fuit amicorum secreta per eam celentur, unde dicitur ab *epistolo* quod est *abscondo.*
>
> [The epistle was invented for two reasons. The first was so that the secrets of friends might be concealed through it, whence it is named from *epistolo*, that is 'I conceal.'][101]

This etymological explanation seems to prioritize a private exchange between sender and recipient, whereby the physical body of the letter extends the emotional and intellectual faculties of its author across time and space, almost like an emotional and intellectual prosthesis. The verb phrase indicating concealment as the motive for epistolary invention, "*per eam celentur*," is passive, so the letter itself does not govern the action, but the prepositional phrase, "*per eam*," indicates that it is the letter itself that allows for concealment. However, the immediately following passage gestures at a more complex network of bodies involved in this process.

> Secunda causa fuit, ut melius quam nuntius exprimat que mandantur. Nuntius enim de omnibus recordari non posset; nam omnium habere memoriam, et penitus in nullo peccare potius est divinitatis quam humanitatis. Si non esset epistola, quo modo possent esse inter duo secreta, que sciente nunio dicerentur?
>
> The second reason was so that it might express better than a messenger what is sent. For a messenger cannot remember everything; for to retain a memory of

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[101] Cited in Camargo, "Where's the brief?" The *ars dictaminis* and reading/writing between the lines," *Disputatio* 1 (1996): 2 and 15 n.4.

> everything and not to err at all in anything is a quality of divinity rather than of humanity. If there were no epistle, how could there be secrets between two persons that might be told to a knowing messenger?[102]

This explanation posits the letter as a textual solution to the problem of human frailty. If only human messengers were not so forgetful and prone to error, one would not require a text to preserve and deliver one's sentiments and messages across time and space. The letter improves upon the messenger's human, and therefore potentially faulty, faculties of memory, and this description ties the messenger and letter together as bodies involved in the communicative exchange. Making this connection even more explicit, Faba mentions that the letter is sometimes referred to as a "fidelis nuntia" or "faithful messenger," thereby substituting for the body of the messenger. While the letter improves upon the messenger's unreliable mnemonic functions, the physically inert body of the letter relies upon the mobility of the messenger's human body, so the relationship between the two is decidedly interdependent.

> Et ideo non immerito fidelis nuntia dicitur secretorum, que crimen amici celat, vercundiam tegit, et absentes quantumque remotos inducit tamquam simul essent presentia corporali.
>
> And, thus, not without reason is it called a faithful messenger, which conceals the trespass of a friend, covers shame, and unites those absent, no matter how distant from each other, as if they were bodily present.[103]

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[102] Cited in Camargo, "Where's the brief?" The *ars dictaminis* and reading/writing between the lines," *Disputatio* 1 (1996): 2 and 15 n.4.

[103] Cited in Camargo, "Where's the brief?" The *ars dictaminis* and reading/writing between the lines," *Disputatio* 1 (1996): 2 and 15 n.4.

Faba concludes by referring to the epistolary situation, the physical distance between sender and recipient, and does so in particularly corporeal terms. The letter unites absent friends as if they were "praesentia corporali" or "bodily present," thus emphasizing that the letter supplements or extends its author's body. Faba's assertion that the letter is called a "faithful messenger" gestures at the tricky relationship between the body of the letter and the body of the messenger. This line almost seems to suggest that the letter can – or perhaps ideally would or could – replace the messenger within the epistolary exchange. Somehow the letter is a faithful version of the messenger, suggesting that the messenger's human body interferes with his potential fidelity. Such theoretical constructions of the letter trouble the "somatic boundaries," to use Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's term, between the messenger's body and the letter.[104] They are in one sense interchangeable – the letter becomes, or replaces, the messenger – and in another sense complementary: each performs a task the other cannot, and both are necessary for the epistolary exchange to take place.

Posthumanism and the Medieval Letter

Medieval epistolary logic does not presuppose stable selves and identities, but offers a circuit of communication, wherein information moves across and through various bodies. Medieval letters, which circulate and assemble meaning across a complex network of multiple bodies and modalities, are therefore fundamentally distinct from modern notions of the letter as a private conveyance of subjectivities. Scholars of medieval epistolarity frequently caution those approaching the form to abandon preconceptions. As Giles Constable characterizes this difference between premodern and

[104] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss, *Thinking the Limits of the Body,* 2.

modern epistles, "Whereas intimacy, spontaneity, and privacy are now considered the essence of the epistolary genre, in the Middle Ages letters were for the most part self-conscious, quasi-public literary documents."[105] Rather than offering private access to the letter-writer's raw and exposed self, the medieval letter is self-consciously a public document, flagging the processes of its production, transmission, and reception. The tenets espoused by posthumanist scholars, who draw our attention to the complex acts of communication between and across human and non-human bodies, can help us understand the medieval letter as it functioned contemporaneously.

Three particular concepts derived from post-humanist scholarship and theory are particularly relevant to my arguments about the relationships between and among the bodies in the epistolary circuit: the cyborg, the prosthesis, and the assemblage. These ideas particularly help us see the epistolary exchange not as reliant upon fixed categories of meaning or embodiment, but rather as concerned with the coming-into-being of meaning and embodiment in moments of contact and connection. Both Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles discuss the cyborg as a means of articulating a posthuman, post-industrial condition. The cyborg, as Haraway introduces the concept in her 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto," accounts for a chimeric fusion between humans and machines, which does not take human bodies for granted as discrete, integral wholes, but rather pays attention to how they are fragmented and reconstituted as composites of information in moments of contact and communication with each other. Cyborgs are hybrids, inhabiting the

[105] Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1976), 11.

intersection of body and technology.[106] Subsequent theorists, like Luciana Parisi, have pointed out that this construction of hybridity leaves the two categories – human and machine – intact, reinscribing the dualism that Haraway sought to thwart.[107]

Some scholars have adopted Deleuze's notion of the assemblage to counter what they see as the vestigial dualism of the cyborg. [108] Like Haraway, Deleuze seeks to deny the fixity and stability of bodies. While the cyborg de-centers the human body, emphasizing its permeability and interconnectivity with non-human, crafted bodies, the assemblage offers more heterogeneity and multiplicity. Assemblages privilege the dynamic and unstable relations between various bodies rather than the hybridized body/ies themselves; bodies thus become sites of possibilities rather than fixed entities (or even hybrid entities). Building on Mary Carruthers' excavation of the medieval conception of the machine as "fully human,"[109] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has argued that this posthuman notion of the porous body corresponds rather aptly to medieval theories of the body, which existed not as a "bounded organism" but "a site of unraveling and

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[106] Donna Haraway, "The Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

[107] Luciana Parisi, *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Biotechnology, and the Mutations of Desire* (London: Continuum, 2004).

[108] In *A Thousand Plateaus* "assemblage" ("agencement" in the original French) replaces the synonymous term "desiring-machine" employed in *The Anti-Oedipus*. See, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi. (London, Continuum Press, 1992).

[109] She uses the Latin *machina* for "any structure that lifts things up or helps to construct things" and traces its use as a metaphor for mental processes in Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Hugh of St. Victor. See Mary Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400 1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 22.

invention."[110] This focus on the dynamic relationships between heterogeneous bodies can help us see the embodied-ness of the epistolary exchange.

Considering the prosthetic and the circuit in turn allows us to see that the relationships that the letter, as a textual body, engenders among other human and non-human bodies and objects are dynamic and crucial to the meaning-making process of epistolarity. While prosthesis is implied in Haraway's cyborg, Hayles unpacks the idea more completely in *How We Became Posthuman*. Arguing that both the concept of "human" and "posthuman" attempt to erase embodiment, Hayles wishes to center the body as "the ground of being."[111] The posthuman view, according to Hayles, assumes that the body is the "original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born."[112] The view of the posthuman body as prosthesis subordinates the body as material to the mind as "pure" information, thereby maintaining a binary between medium and content.

It is tempting to view the letter as a prosthetic of its sender; indeed, the modern letter is often imagined in prosthetic terms as an extension or replacement of the sender/author. However, viewing the medieval letter this way fails to account fully for the *process* of its material embodiment, and the disparate bodies and technologies involved. Rather than seeing the letter as the means through which one discrete human body extends to another, we should center the letter itself, as a materially embodied text,

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[110] Jeffrey J. Cohen and Gail Weiss, "Introduction" in *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen and Gail Weiss (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003), 1.

[111] Katharine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 5.

[112] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 3.

and consider it as a site of dynamic possibilities, the gathering place for various embodied interactions.

If we center the letter as the object of inquiry and insist on its emphatically material embodiment, then we can see epistolarity as constituting a dynamic circuit of bodies and events. Medieval epistolary logic allows us to modify Haraway's periodization. She claims that as we have moved from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous information system, our machines have become "disturbingly lively" and we, "frighteningly inert."[113] If we consider the medieval letter as a technology – and Haraway posits writing as a technology of the cyborg – then we could see it as "lively," in Haraway's terms. Because the medieval letter does not have a stable author or reader but is rather composed and interpreted by a variety of actors, technologies, and materials, it constitutes an integrated and dynamic circuit of communication.

My definition of the letter as a circuit derives in part from the notion of the assemblage. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "the object, the real thing, the thing that acts, exists only provided that it holds humans and nonhumans together, continuously… What we are looking at is not a human thing, nor is it an inhuman thing. It offers, rather, a continuous passage, a commerce, an interchange, between what humans inscribe in it and what it prescribes to humans. It translates the one into the other."[114] What is crucial is here is the continuity of the dynamic interchange of information. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen uses this passage to describe how stirrup, knight, and horse assemble into an "inhuman circuit," in which "agency, possibility, and identity are mobile, the products of relations

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[113] Haraway, "The Cyborg Manifesto," 158.

[114] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 80.

of movement rather than a static residuum contained in discrete bodies and objects."[115] The key elements in this construction are not the bodies themselves but the moments and points of contact between and among them – their modes and moments of interaction. The medieval letter, I argue, functions similarly, offering at different points in the epistolary exchange sites of commerce and interchange for the various human actors involved.

Romance of State and the Staging of the Diplomatic Epistolary Circuit

On balance, and at the risk of generalization, I have found that romance fictionalizes diplomacy more than other genres. They stage interactions, both peaceful and violent, between various state actors. From the Arthurian texts that explore early Britain's relationship to the Roman empire to the crusading romances that depict relations between groups marked by racial, ethnic, and religious differences, romance often takes as its subject the processes of statecraft. Scholars have analyzed the relationship between romance and medieval theorizations of statecraft and national identity. While "hitherto, the *chronicle* has been assumed to be the principal medieval literary genre in which a country's identity is addressed or contemplated in narrative, just as the *epic* has been assumed to address the collective ethnic identity of tribes, the *chanson de geste* to address relations between the monarch and retainers-in-chief, and romance to address the concerns preoccupying chivalric communities," Geraldine Heng offers romance "simultaneously and in tandem, as a genre *of the nation*: a literary medium that solicits or invents the cultural means by which the medieval nation might be most productively

[115] Jeffrey J. Cohen, "Inhuman Circuit," in *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen and Gail Weiss (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 174.

conceptualized, and projected, for a diverse society of peoples otherwise ranged along internal divides”[116] Thus, when romances offer scenes of bureaucratic machinations, we can see them as imagining the ways that the state recruits texts and bodies in its project of self-conceptualization. Epistolary diplomacy is often the textual process through which states negotiate and articulate their status and relationship in these romances. We can see the textual work of epistolarity in these texts then as statecraft itself, and the messenger's bodies who perform this work are subsumed into the textual and embodied processes of power.

As the body of representative texts for this aspect of fictionalized bureaucracy, I have turned to a kind of text that I loosely describe as “romances of state,” texts that attend ,within the context of romance, to the establishment of or conflict between states (keeping in mind that the theoretical construction of statehood is distinct from our own and that this categorical distinction might be applied anachronistically). These texts depict somewhat parodically diplomatic documents and press upon the tensions of diplomacy as they relate to the exchange and relative value of bodies and texts. In other words, diplomacy is the content of both romance as a genre and documentary epistolarity as a medium and both share this concern with the circuitry of bodies. Epistolarity offers romance a way of conceiving of the textual processes of nascent statehood. Likewise, romance uses diplomatic epistolarity to work through categories of nation, statehood, and empire.

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[116] Geraldine Heng, *Empires of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 6.

Epistolarity was central to medieval diplomacy in practice and in literature, with scenes illustrating the ways in which power is exchanged and enacted through the circulation of letters and bodies. This is also enacted, plot-wise, through hostage exchanges, wherein states literalize their embodied relationships through the exchange of human bodies belonging to and standing in for each state. Medieval hostageship invokes a logic of embodiment and relative personhood similar to that of the epistolary circuit, wherein the messenger is problematically both deficiently and excessively human. The messenger's human faculties – mobility, speech – act in service of the sender's will and authority, but as Faba's text demonstrates epistolary theorists were anxious about the messenger's potential deficiencies: they might forget or misunderstand the sender's meaning. The relative personhood of medieval hostages was also theoretically contested. Historians have tied themselves in terminological knots in their attempts to understand the theoretical personhood to ascribe to medieval hostages. They consider to what extent and under what legal and conceptual frameworks hostages were understood to have individual, human rights. Kosto discusses this historiographical anxiety: "Legal historians also distinguish between real and personal surety, between things and people used as guarantees. Hostages have been understood as a mixture of the two: they are people, but from a legal standpoint they are treated as things (not unlike slaves)." Kosto presses on this theory of relative personhood, "While the medieval vocabulary of guarantee does not, as will be seen, consistently maintain a distinction between real and personal sureties, deciding whether a given guarantee is a person or an object is an essential starting point in an investigation of hostageship."[117] It is this thread - the ambivalence

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[117] Adam J. Kosto, *Hostages in the Middle Ages: Problems and Perspectives* (Oxford:

between personhood and thing-ness - that I find most helpful in my understanding of how medieval romances depict diplomatic hostageship and epistolary exchanges. As the dictaminal treatises attest, epistolarity enlivens the text-object of the letter and somewhat dehumanizes the body of the messenger, reducing it to a tool in service of the letter's mobility.

A brief reading of the diplomatic exchanges in the *Alliterative Morte Arthur* elucidates these connections between hostageship and epistolarity, wherein the mechanics of diplomacy renders certain bodies as supplementary to it. Paying attention to epistolarity shows how Arthur yokes texts and bodies together in service of asserting his independence from Rome's imperial power. The opening scene establishes epistolarity as central to the diplomatic relationship between Arthur's court and its putative imperial overlords. After relating the circumstances and heretofore achievements of Arthur's court, the text opens with his New Year's reception of a surprise embassy of a senator and several knights sent from Rome by Emperor Lucius Tiberius.[118] The senator conveys to the court a message from the emperor, "Sir Lucius Iberius,   the Emperour of Rome,/Salues thee as subjet,   under his sele rich."[119] The senator uses dictaminal and epistolary convention to insist upon Arthur's imperial subjugation. He uses the *salutio* to place Lucius in the position of power according to dictaminal convention, as the subject and the first person mentioned, and to disempower Arthur, situating him as the

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Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

[118] Lucius is an apparent invention of Geoffrey of Monmouth; see Valerie Krishna, ed. *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*. (New York: Burt Franklin and Company, Inc., 1976), 165.

[119] *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, in *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, ed. Larry Benson and Edward E. Foster. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), ll. 85-86.

grammatical object, and imperial subject. The senator describes Arthur as Lucius's subject before acknowledging his status as King. Moreover, the senator ties Arthur's status as subject to his being under the emperor's seal, thus invoking the conventions of epistolary *media* as well as dictaminal form.

The court's reaction to the Roman embassy emphasizes epistolarity and attends to the details of dictaminal and diplomatic conventions. Arthur and his attendants bridle at the senator's summons, delivered "with notaries sign" that Arthur and his "pris knights"[120] appear in Rome by Lammas Day and account for their occupation of lands that "owe homage of old til him and his elders."[121] Indeed, Arthur's eyes burned so fiercely that the Romans begged him to "misdo no messenger for mensk of thyselven," thus invoking Arthur's honor and linking it to his treatment of diplomatic personnel.[122] The messengers then posit themselves as extensions of Lucius' will, claiming "it is lelful til us his liking to work."[123] If the messengers see themselves as mere extensions or supplements to the will of their message's sender, the epistolary circuit also puts them in the power of the message's recipient, as they attempt to negotiate a graceful exit from Arthur's court. After Arthur declares his intention to defeat Lucius in combat, he tells the hapless messengers that they are free to go, providing them the necessary epistolary documentation to do so: "My summons are certified and thou art full served/Of cundit and credens; kaire where thee likes."[124] While Arthur says they may go where they like,

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[120] *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, 93.
[121] *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, 98.
[122] *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, 125.
[123] *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, 129.
[124] *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, 442-43.

his permission has its limits, as he dictates very precisely the messengers' manner of exit from the country, specifying the route, ("by Watling Street and by no way elles"[125]) the pace, ("sixty mile on a day"[126]) and the resting spots. If they exceed their licensed stay in Arthur's realm, the results will be gruesome as Arthur promises that they will be beheaded, torn apart by horses, and then hung so that dogs may gnaw their corpses. The violence is crucial here, I think, as it underscores the extent to which the messengers' human bodies are subject to the manner of their message's reception. Moreover, the terms of their safe conduct, the inviolability or violability of their bodies, is attested with epistolary technology, the sealed letter.

If Arthur makes it clear that the messengers' physical safety is subject to his epistolary technology, the senator also points out that Arthur's status is bound up in his treatment of the messengers. After Arthur threatens them with the consequences of tarrying in Britain, the senator declares, "If any unlawful lede   let us by the way,/Within thy license, lord,   thy los is inpaired."[127] He yet again ties Arthur's fame ("los" here) and reputation to his appropriate performance of epistolary diplomacy. Arthur, in turn, reassures the senator that he and his party will be "seker under my sele," as they proceed to their planned exit. The conclusion to their interaction thereby underlines the vulnerable bodies and epistolary technologies that perform the work of diplomacy.

Arthur asserts his independence from Rome's imperial power through a violent parody of epistolary diplomacy. Later in the text, after Arthur has defeated both a lecherous giant and Emperor Lucius's forces in France, he finally meets the demand

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[125] *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, 449.

[126] *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, 447.

[127] *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, 451.

conveyed by Lucius's messengers: that of a tribute from Arthur to the emperor. The tribute is not what Lucius likely intended, but what Arthur chooses to send does offer an interesting take on the bodily demands of the diplomatic epistolary circuit. After his decisive conflict with Lucius, Arthur orders that a selection of the enemy corpses be gathered and carefully packaged and sent to Rome as a mocking sort of tribute. The text first details the national composition of the corpses:

> Then harawdes hiely   at hest of the lordes,
>
> Huntes up the haythemen   that on height ligges,
>
> The Sowdan of Surry   and certain kinges,
>
> Sixty of the chef   senatours of Rome.[128]

Notably, the text relates not only the corpse's nationalities (Syrian and Roman), but also their role within their various states of origin (sultan, kings, and senators). These states have different bureaucratic structures, which means the bodies not only have different titles but their roles – sultan, kings, senators – are construed differently across these states. Next the text pays careful attention to the manner in which the bodies are prepared for transport.

> Then they buskes and bawmed   thir burlich kinges,
>
> Sewed them in sendell   sixty-fold after,
>
> Lapped them in lede,   less that they sholde
>
> Change or chauffe   yif they might escheve[129]

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[128] *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, 2294-97.

[129] *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, 2298-2301.

The goal here seems to be to preserve the corpses so that their appearance does not change from the moment of the message's transmission to the moment of its reception, to freeze them in place to minimize the impact of the temporal and spatial distance from the point of composition to the point of delivery. The bodies undergo several physical and chemical processes: they are cured in balm, sewed into linen or cotton,[130] and then wrapped in lead. As the bodily integrity of the Roman embassy was always vulnerable to Arthur's whims, Arthur seeks to preserve this diplomatic body's integrity as completely as possible. He seeks to render these epistolary – for these bodies comprise a rather literal response to the original emissaries – bodies as superhumanly static and invulnerable to either the journey or the natural processes of decomposition.

The corpses are textualized in a way that renders them as representatives or stand-ins for their states. Like the messenger in Faba's theorization, they are dehumanized and subsumed into a communicative process, in this case an exchange of power between two quarrelling states. The final steps taken to prepare the message for its transmission across France and to Rome are to conjoin the bodies with texts that describe their national origins:

> Closed in kestes   clene unto Rome,
>
> With their banners aboven,   their badges there-under,
>
> In what countree they kaire,   that knightes might know
>
> Ech king by his colours,   in kith where he lenged.[131]

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[130] See cendel, n. 1 and 2 MED

[131] *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, 2298-2305

After the corpses have been sealed into their leaden preservatives, the relevant texts append the bodies the make their significance clear to the recipients. The message then is a conjoined body-text that works along the lines that epistolary theorists like Faba established. Thus, the *Morte Arthur* draws to the fore the relative personhood of diplomatic personnel, pressing on the ambivalence between human and object present in the discourses of medieval hostageship and medieval epistolarity.

Killing the Messenger in Richard Coer de Lyon

If Arthur's epistolary performance asserts his nation's independence from an imperial power, then the next text shows one power using epistolarity to assert violent dominance over another group, whose religious and racial differences are emphasized throughout. Midway through *Richard Coer de Lyon*, the titular hero plays an elaborate and grotesque prank on the Saracen emissaries sent to negotiate for the release of their imprisoned kinsmen. He treats his guests to a lavish banquet, the centerpiece of which is the severed, mutilated heads of the prisoners in question, their names inscribed on the heads and accompanied by text explaining their lineage. The text describes the Saracens' shocked reaction thus: "And whenee they the lettre redde/To be slayn ful sore they dredde."[132] The Saracen bodies are transformed into texts, namely letters, and Richard produces these "letters" as his participation in an ongoing epistolary exchange. This scene is most often read in terms of the text's engagement with cannibalism, and troubles the boundaries between edible and non-edible bodies, but I argue that this scene participates in medieval epistolary logic and troubles the relationship between the bodies

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[132] *Richard Coer de Lyon*, ed. Peter Larkin. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2015), ll. 3467-78.

involved in the epistolary exchange: the body of the messenger and the body of the letter.[133]

The text and human body supplement one another in the banquet scene, as Richard parodies and inverts epistolary logic. The text and human body reverse their conventional roles. The severed human heads provide the essential content of Richard's message and generate the desired affective response, the emissaries' revulsion and fear, while the text "speaks" for the bodies and makes the content intelligible to its recipients. The event, the slaughter of the captives and their transformative mutilation, is thus translated across multiple objects. Neither has meaning without reference to the other. Richard produces a letter in accord with dictaminal precepts: a conjoined product of human body and text. Reading this scene thus allows us to see the complex intercorporeal relationships embedded in epistolary logic and also how bureaucratic, textual processes can be used to absorb racial differences.

An epistolary scene earlier in *Richard Coer de Lyon* maps the letter writing process rather precisely on to the series of mediations that the epistolary circuit entails. This scene establishes the exchange of texts and bodies as central to the diplomatic processes of hostageship and serves as a useful counterpoint for the Saracen banquet scene. Held captive by the King of Almayne, Richard sends a letter back to England to

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[133] See Alan Ambrisco, "Cannibalism and Cultural Encounters in *Richard Coeur de Lion*," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29.3 (1999): 499-528; Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), especially Chapter 2: "The Romance of England: *Richard Coer de Lyon* and the Politics of Race, Religion, Sexuality, and Nation"; Suzanne Conklin Akbari, "The Hunger for National Identity in *Richard Coer de Lion*," in *Reading Medieval Culture: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Hanning*, ed. Robert M. Stein and Sandra Pierson Prior. (Notre-Dame: University of Notre-Dame Press, 2005): 67-83.

raise funds for his release. After Richard solicits an appropriate messenger who "wole for me wende/To Engeland to my chaunceler,"[134] he outsources the actual composition for the letter: he "dede a lettre wryte/A noble clerk it gan adyte."[135] Richard seals the letter and sends it on its way to England with the messenger knight. The knight makes his way to London and "fond hem everylkon"[136] who would comprise an appropriate audience for the message. The chancellor then breaks the seal, and "the lettre was rede among hem alle."[137] Once the ransom is assembled, the chancellor addresses his reply to the messenger, who heads the procession of bishops, barons leading the carefully compiled ransom package back to Germany and exchanges it for Richard's freedom. The exchange emphasizes the multiple steps in the epistolary exchange and the active role that both the messenger and the clerk play. The message – King Richards needs to be ransomed – is translated across multiple human and non-human bodies. This early epistolary ransom exchange thus introduces the notion that human bodies and epistolary texts are necessary supplements to one another.

Richard's grotesque participation in another ransom exchange parodically exaggerates this element of epistolary logic to serve the English king's gory "joke." The text accounts for the many steps and bodies involved in comprising the exchange, but Richard inverts and exaggerates the relationship that these bodies have with one another. Notably, while this second, monstrous epistolary scene occurs after Richard has been tricked into eating Saracen flesh. Cannibalism substitutes one human, and therefore

[134] *Richard Coer de Lyon,*1175-76.
[135] *Richard Coer de Lyon,* 1181-82.
[136] *Richard Coer de Lyon*, 1198.
[137] *Richard Coer de Lyon*, 1205.

supposedly inedible body, for another animal, and therefore supposedly edible one. Richard's reaction when he discovers the substance of his meal is to "lawghe as he were wood": he finds this substitution of supposedly un-substitutable bodies funny.[138] Scholars like Geraldine Heng and Suzanne Conklin Akbari have studied how the text treats the racial differences encoded on the Saracen bodies. Heng argues that the scene, and the poem as a whole, materializes "English nationalist feeling through the outline of crusade history."[139] I suggest that focusing on how the Saracen bodies are turned not just into consumable bodies but into consumable texts shows us that the text was interested in the way that bureaucracy and statecraft absorbs and consumes bodies, and renders them into legible texts in service of the state's goals.

Newly delighted and fascinated by the confusion of somatic categories and bodily substitution, the ransom exchange offers a ripe opportunity for Richard's sense of humor. As ransom exchanges rely on the substitution of bodies for material objects and are conducted, as Richard's was earlier, through mediated epistolary exchanges, Richard constructs a prank that employs cannibalism in order to parody the logic of epistolarity, whereby the letter both substitutes and supplements the human body. The joke obviously relies on the substitution of the Saracen bodies for food, but also on the exaggeration of the interdependent relationship of the epistolary text and human bodies. The text leaves the letters themselves largely unmentioned, and instead focuses on the way that the bodies of the messengers replace the letters and are transformed into text. The horror is not just that the bodies are consumable, but that the machinations of statecraft can

[138] *Richard Coer de Lyon,* 3215.
[139] Heng, *Empires of Magic*, 66.

transform the bodies of its denizens into text, in service of a diplomatic performance or exchange.

As Richard was once held captive by the King of Almeyne, now he holds several noble Saracens hostage. These Saracens then initiate the same sequence of events that Richard had performed in order to attain his own freedom: they send home for help. Though it is not explicit in the text, as the previous ransom exchange accounted for Richard's careful dictation of a message to a scribe and the selection of a messenger, we can reasonably presume that the Saracen prisoners followed roughly the same process. As a response to the missive sent by the captive Saracens, Saladin sends a meticulous message along with a carefully selected assembly of emissaries and material gifts. The gifts are included as a nod to the Saracen court's interpretation of English cultural proclivities, as the nobles urge the Sultan to offer a handsome ransom because "Men saye Englyssche love weel gyfte."[140] This is another way in which human bodies are depersonalized within statecraft and used as metonyms for the broader community. This assembly of bodies is meant to exchange or substitute the Saracen bodies held by the English king. In light of this concern, the passage pays special attention to the composition of the body of messengers:

> Of gold, weel twenty mennys lyfte,
>
> Were layd on mule and rabyte,
>
> Ten eerles alle clad in samyte,
>
> All olde, hore, and nought yungge,

---

[140] *Richard Coer de Lyon,* 3375.

That were weel avyse of tungge.[141]

The text makes explicit the age of the messengers and their clothing, emphasizing that their physical bodies are crucial to diplomatic success. The "olde, hore" bodies of the messengers, wrapped and sealed in samite, a material that authorizes them as noble interlocutors, comprise an integral piece of the message itself. In a way, this scene mimics the careful composition of Richard's ransom in London. As the English chancellor packaged the treasure and money with barons and bishops, the Sultan does the same with earls and mules. Moreover, the samite functions as a sort of seal here. Like the seal on the letter Richard sends to London, the samite *authorizes* the messengers' bodies. Richard's letter can "speak" on Richard's behalf because the seal carries his presence with it, and the samite similarly allows the noble emissaries to speak for the Sultan.

Richard's reception of the Saracen emissaries emphasizes the physical gestures involved in the diplomatic performance, with the epistolary circuit drawing together bodies in motion:

To Kyng Richard the tresore broughte,

On knees of grace hym besoughte:

"Our Sawdon sendith thee this tresore,

And wole be thy frend evermore,

For the prisouns that thu dest neme.

Let hem goo with lyfe and leme![142]

[141] *Richard Coer de Lyon*, 3376-82.

[142] *Richard Coer de Lyon,* 3381-3386.

This scene ties together the material gifts, which are to be substituted for the imprisoned Saracen bodies, with the messengers and allows them to speak on the Sultan's behalf. While Richard's ransom note was read aloud verbatim by the Chancellor – allowing the letter and the Chancellor's body to "speak" for Richard together – the Saracen emissaries convey the Sultan's message in the third person. The emissaries internalize the message and filter it through their own diplomatic performance.

It is within this explicitly epistolary and diplomatic context that Richard plans his violent prank, and the "joke" of the cannibalistic banquet only works if it is understood in terms of the epistolary logic that the diplomatic preface to the meal carefully establishes. If the Sultan pays careful attention to the bodily composition of his envoy, Richard's preparation of the joke grotesquely emphasizes the interchangeability between the bodies of text and messenger. Richard appends the heads of the Saracens with text, ordering his marshal:

> Looke every mannys name thou wryte,
>
> Upon a scrowe of parchemyn.
>
> …
>
> Hys name faste above hys browe,
>
> What he hyghte and of what kyn born.[143]

Not only does the text *append* the body, but the body is also transformed into text, as each prisoner's "name was wreten in hys forheved." This is, to some extent, an inversion of the relationship between messenger's body and letter described by historians of medieval epistolary practice and within the epistolary theories of the *ars dictaminis*. Here

[143] *Richard Coer de Lyon*, 3418-33

it is not the human body that supplements or explicates the textual body. In this instance, the body provides the primary content of the message, while the text serves as a supplementary explication.

The messengers' reaction to the grisly presentation underscores their understanding of the epistolary exchange of bodies and text. Richard has the Saracen heads and texts arranged on the table in such a way as to emphasize the interdependence of the two supplementary bodies and to implicate the emissaries themselves in the exchange.

> The messaungerys were servyd soo,
> Evere an hed betwyxe twoo.
> In the forehed wreten hyse name:
> …
> And whenee they the lettre redde,
> To be slayn ful sore they dredde.[144]

The severed heads and their appended text sit between each emissary, emphasizing the intermediacy of the body-text within this communicative exchange. The head and text together here comprise a single letter, both elements supplementing one another to produce one epistolary "body." Moreover, the immediate reaction of the emissaries is to fear a similar fate. The emissaries seem to interpret this monstrous transformation of body into letter as a threat to their own bodies.[145] The gruesome spectacle makes

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[144] *Richard Coer de Lyon*, 3461-68

[145] Obviously, they are also afraid because Richard has just killed their friends, in addition to their identification with the epistolary bodies.

graphically real the implicit logic of the epistolary exchange: the bodies of the messengers are both necessary and vulnerable to the exchange.

If the emissaries are implicated by the epistolary bodies that Richard serves them, he concludes the grotesque performance by rather sardonically promising them no harm: opening a banquet with Saracen heads for appetizers is merely a minor point of cultural difference, but killing messengers is simply and universally declassé. Richard jokes (and one can easily imagine him snickering through the following lines):

> Ye schale be therof sertayn,
> In saf condyt to wende agayn;
> For I ne wolde, for no thyng,
> That wurd of me in the world scholde spryng,
> That I were so vylayne of maners
> For to mysdoo messengeres[146]

Though Richard is relying on cliché – don't kill the messenger – to conclude his elaborate prank on the hapless Saracen messengers, he crucially posits his parody of epistolary logic as more threatening to diplomacy than his cannibalism. The scene does not end with this cruel punchline, however; Richard charges a Saracen messenger with delivering his own message to the Sultan. The messengers are thus tasked with returning home and delivering the news of their kinsmen's grisly demise and of Richard's plan to remain until he has eaten every Saracen. The messengers return home, prostrate themselves in front of the Sultan as they did in front of Richard, and tell their lord about the banquet and Richard's terms. Richard thus appropriates the Saracen bodies yet again.

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[146] *Richard Coer de Lyon*, 3515-20.

He forces them to translate the event into their memory, to carry it back, and to speak it. In an almost sadistic conclusion to his prank, Richard forces the messengers to mediate his horrifying parody of epistolary mediation.

The parodic exaggeration of epistolary logic, which conjoins the human body of the messenger and the textual "body" of the letter, drives Richard's cruel joke but also tests and pushes against the logic of epistolary theory. The epistolarity in *Richard Coer de Lyon* demonstrates the interdependency of the multiple bodies involved in the epistolary exchange, which Jeffrey Jerome Cohen might term an "inhuman circuit" or "transformative assemblage [in which] agency, possibility, and identity are mobile, the products of relations of movement rather than a static residuum contained in discrete bodies and objects."[147] The action of epistolarity, the process of communication and signification across distances of time and space, complicates the relationship between human body and text. It is too easy to see the letter as merely the perfect extension of the sender's voice and will. The letter is a product of and a full participant in the process of mediation. The messenger and his body, far from being merely the facilitator of an exchange between two other parties, is inextricably enmeshed in this web. Both are simultaneously mediated and mediating and the boundaries between their bodies and actions are inseparable

Bevis, briefly

The eponymous hero of the 14th century romance *Bevis of Hampton* is subject to an epistolary trick, delivering a message that instructs the recipient to kill him. In this text an English knight is subsumed into a foreign bureaucracy, and the text suggests that

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[147] Cohen, "Inhuman Circuit," 174.

diplomatic epistolarity is an internationally recognized set of practices and media. That is to say, one nation's bureaucratic processes are coherent and intelligible even to those outside of that nation. Moreover, this text emphasizes the difference between diplomatic and martial personnel. While the previous two examples involve one group asserting independence from or dominance over another, this text seems to suggest a cultural parity between Bevis's culture of origin and the one in which he finds himself. Bevis, having fled England and his murderous mother, lands in the Armenian court of King Ermin and finds himself inconveniently besotted with the King's daughter, Josian. Bevis' rival for Josian, King Brademond, spreads a rumor that Bevis has slept with Josian, infuriating Ermin. To rid himself of Bevis, Ermin decides to send Bevis as a messenger to Brademond, carrying sealed letter that identifies Bevis as Josian's murderer. Ermin's instructions specify that Bevis journey alone and that he swear upon the law not to show the letter to anyone else.

> Al in solas and in delit
>
> Thow most him bere this ilche scriit!
>
> Ac yif yow schelt me letter bere,
>
> Upon the lai thow schelt me swere,
>
> That thow me schelt with no man mele,
>
> To schewe the prente of me sele!"[148]

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[148] *Bevis of Hampton*, 1237-1244 from *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston*, eds. Graham Drake, Eve Salisbury, and Ronald B. Herzman (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997).

Ermin thus ties epistolary discourse to legal discourse by insisting that Bevis swear upon the law. He also invokes the specific medium of epistolarity, the material conditions that structure Bevis's interactions with the text, namely the seal here. Bevis intends to take his supernaturally gifted horse, Arondel, on the journey, but Ermin insists that doing so would be illegal, again invoking legal discourse: "King Ermin seide in is sawe,/That ner no mesager is lawe,/To ride upon an hevi stede,"[149] This is a particularly interesting caveat as it draws a distinction between diplomatic personnel and military personnel, and it indicates that the law is used to differentiate the two bodies. Messengers, as diplomatic personnel, are – according to Ermin – not allowed to travel on warhorses; their mode of travel must not seem martial.

The text insistently attends to the epistolary media that accompany Bevis on his mission, emphasizing that his body is a constituent element among other media in the completion of the epistolary circuit. In an implausible stroke of good luck, Bevis encounters a friend on his journey, Terri, the son of his former tutor, Saber. Bevis and Terri reminisce, and then Terri notices the letter Bevis is carrying and asks about it: "Terri on Beves beheld/And segh the boiste with a scheld/'Me thenketh, thow ert a massager.'"[150] Again the texts attends to the specific elements of the epistolary media, identifying the letter case ("boiste") and the seal ("scheld"), both of which protect the letter's secrecy during its transmission. [151] Terri first notices these elements of epistolary media and then identifies Bevis as a participant in the epistolary circuit; the order of this

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[149] *Bevis of Hampton*, 1251-53.

[150] *Bevis of Hampton,* 1321-23.

[151] Interestingly, this is the first use of "boist" as a box for letters noted in the Middle English Dictionary see "boist(e" n. 1b.

identification suggests that Bevis' human body is one among a network, that he is participating alongside, the letter box and the seal as an element of the epistolary circuit. Terri also points to a specific training that permits him to recognize the epistolary media for what they are and to see that danger that Bevis has put his body in by becoming an element of the circuit:

> Icham a clerk and to scole yede:
> Sire, let me the letter rede,
> For thow might have gret doute,
> Thin owene deth to bere aboute!"[152]

Terri here gestures at the specific training and education necessary for a diplomatic career. Moreover, this background seems to have prepared him to recognize the potential danger of the diplomatic epistolary circuit, which Bevis' noble, martial background has not trained him to see. This act of epistolary treachery demonstrates that even when the messenger is the protagonist, they are vulnerable to the dehumanization of diplomacy's mechanics. When they operate as messengers, their bodies become a constituent element of the epistolary circuit and they are therefore vulnerable to the circuit.

Silence and Devious Epistolarity

Likewise, in *Silence*, a 13th century romance discovered in the early 20th century in Nottingham, the titular protagonist is the subject of an epistolary trick, in which a messenger carries a letter instructing the recipient to slay its bearer. While the previous three examples center men and martial diplomacy, my final two examples show how women in positions of power, but not authority, can manipulate and disrupt the

[152] *Bevis of Hampton*, 1321-8.

bureaucratic machinations of power. Both texts depict evil queens, excluded from the authorized processes of state power, subverting the epistolary circuit, thereby disrupting the workings of the state.

While the exchange of letters in *Silence* does not involve cannibalism, it still makes several bodies quite vulnerable. The scene emphasize that romances not only saw epistolarity as a diplomatic technology, but also that the epistolary circuit made multiple bodies vulnerable, was subject to subversion of its processes and manipulation of the bodies involved. The Queen Eufemie, who has long lusted after and been rebuffed by Silence, complains to her husband that Silence has assaulted her. [153] The King decides to send Silence to the King of France to finish his courtly education at a safe remove from the Queen. He intends to send Silence along with the appropriate letter of introduction and dictates one to his chancellor. The vengeful Queen intercepts and distracts the chancellor before he has the chance to seal the letter. She has written one of her own in which the King of England asks the King of France to behead the one who bears it. She successfully swaps the letters; the unknowing chancellor seals the Queen's false letter. When Silence arrives at the court of the King of France, the King embraces him as a friend before his own chancellor can read the inflammatory contents of the forged letter before the court. The letter is then read aloud and puts the King of France in a diplomatic pickle: he must reconcile his public embrace of Silence with his obligations to King Evan. He summons a council to debate his response and each cites different pieces of

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[153] Silence is identified as female at birth but has been raised and performs as a young man for most of the text's action in order to circumvent the inheritance laws instituted by the lustful Queen's husband, King Evan of England, after a property dispute between the husbands of two aristocratic twin heiresses.

epistolary and diplomatic logic in order to make his point. The letter comes up against the kiss of peace as a diplomatic tool. One of the counts emphasizes that the request to behead Silence must be taken seriously as the King sent it "by seal and letter" ("Est venus nostre roi require par son seël et par son brief").[154] The letter's strange multiple temporalities and the various personnel involved are all explicitly invoked as the two Kings resolve their diplomatic quandary. These scenes do more than prove that letters were a means or technology of diplomacy but also illustrate the ways in which medieval authors imagined epistolarity as a sight of competing agencies, involving and implicating multiple bodies. Setting these epistolary scenes in literature against the backdrop of documentary culture – and particularly in terms of the letter's use as a bureaucratic tool – we can see the extent to which bureaucratic epistolarity and literary epistolarity are mutually constitutive, offering the medieval letter as a site of overlap between medieval literature and documentary culture. Moreover, we can see how a woman, Eufemie, who is proximate to power but not authorized to wield it publicly, can inveigle herself into the epistolary circuit via the messenger and subvert the diplomatic process to her own ends.

The Tale of Constance

The text of the letter and the human body of the messenger supplement and are made vulnerable to one another in the epistolary exchanges in the "Tale of Constance" in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. The evil Queen is likewise able to manipulate these vulnerable bodies and disrupt official communicative processes, subverting the state's bureaucratic processes. After the birth of Constance's safe delivery of a healthy son, her

[154] Sarah Roche-Mahdi ed. and trans. *Silence. A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1992), 4548.

attendants prepare a letter recording the happy news to send to the King, by way of messenger whose function is described before his title "he that *scholde* go between" (and the use of the "should" is perhaps interesting in light of his eventual failure). We are given some details about the path that the messenger must physically traverse in order to convey the letter from sender to recipient; on the first day he comes to the Queen's residence and there seeks and receives gifts from the queen for his news. The messenger "spills all the cause" of the letter; Notably, the messenger is not described as delivering the letter but of conveying its contents himself. The textual body of the letter here is merely meant to supplement or append the human body of the messenger. His greed and indiscrete, and presumably unauthorized, disclosure of the letter's contents, facilitates the first step of Domilda's campaign to disgrace her daughter-in-law, as she surreptitiously alters the content of the letter.

The messenger awakes the next morning, unaware of the Queen's violation of the text with which he has been entrusted. He conveys the letter to its destination, now bearing rather than happy tidings, news that Constance has delivered a child "fro kinde whiche stante al amis"[155] and said child has been replaced with the healthy child of poor parents. The king's reaction to the upsetting news is not described, but we are told that "he makth the messager no chiere" before sending him on his way back to Constance with another letter. [156] The "giftless" messenger then returns by way of the same route he took before, stopping again at the Queen's.[157] The Queen this time plies the messenger

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[155] John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 2nd edition. ed. Russell A. Peck (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013), l. 967.

[156] Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, l. 992.

[157] Gower *Confessio Amantis*, l. 998.

with drink as well as wine. The messenger's subsequent stupor – which is attributed not only to his drunkenness but his road-weariness – allows the Queen again to sneak into his room and again alter the letter, so that now it orders the Bishop and company to set Constance and her child out to sea. When the senders and recipients of the falsified letters are reunited, both thoroughly perplexed at the miscommunication and horrified at its results, they summon the messenger through whose testimony they can determine the agent of the letters' violation. The King then throws his meddling mother into a fire as punishment for her "backbiting"

A few points about the letters' falsification and the discovery thereof stand out in terms of the relationship(s) that the epistolary exchange or circuit establishes between the textual and human bodies involved. We are invited by the focus on the distances and route travelled by the messenger – as well as the description of his delivery or performance of the letter – to see the epistolary exchange not as a binary process of writing and reading, but as one that unfolds across a number of events and bodies. While we are only given the intended contents of the original letters in indirect speech, the Queen's falsified letters are quoted in full and described as "speaking." Thus, the letters, after the Queen's intervention, become more "lively" to pick up Haraway's term. And if the letters themselves become more lively, the personnel charged with safekeeeping the contents of the message, and facilitating the communication of distant sender and recipient across the spatiotemporal gap separating them, has become perhaps disastrously inert. The messenger seems to be concentrated fully on inveigling a generous tip from those on his route and allows his body to be compromised into a drunken stupor. In these instances, the failures of the letters – conjoined products of human body and text – are

construed as a manipulation of both of these bodies. The textual body is made vulnerable to tampering by the failures of its supplementary or complementary human body. Moreover, it is only the presence of the messenger himself that can set things right. He is subject to interrogation by the King in order to right the epistolary failure, demonstrating the extent to which the messenger is implicated in the exchange or circuit. Reading this scene thus allows us to see the complex intercorporeal relationships embedded in epistolary logic.

By way of conclusion, it is perhaps worth noting that the case of the counterfeit letters stands not only within Book 2's association of envy with the physical faculties of speech, but also in opposition to a scene earlier in the tale in which a book as a site of authorized truth telling. The false knight swears on a book and is immediately struck down by God. That the book was used as a verifying material object within a testamentary procedure suggests the crucial role of text in truth-making/verifying, but that the knight lied and was only outed by divine intervention perhaps suggests that this tale is interested in the way different modes of textual engagements are both efficacious and vulnerable to manipulation. Moreover, the text also seems interested in the ways that official power structures use these different modes of textual engagement to subsume bodies within itself.

The epistolary mis-exchanges in The Tale of Constance, and the messenger as the body that both facilitates the exchange and serves as the site of its failure, attest to the complicated relationship between the human and non-human epistolary bodies. The action of epistolarity, the process of communication and signification across distances of time and space, complicates the relationship between human body and text. It is too easy

to see the letter as merely the perfect extension of the sender's voice and will. The letter is a product of and a full participant in the process of mediation. The messenger and his body, far from being merely the facilitator of an exchange between two other parties, is inextricably enmeshed in this web. Both are simultaneously mediated and mediating and the boundaries between their bodies and actions are inseparable.

Conclusion

The messenger's bodies across these romances serve as sites of problematic vulnerability – both in terms of the epistolary circuit as well as their own survival. The messengers' fallibilities are linked to their human, physical frailties. Moreover, the messengers are, to an extent, dehumanized in the exchange, and indeed that seems to be the very point. Their purpose is to disappear and erase the distance between sender and recipient. When they show up in a text, it is often because the exchange has gone awry; their visibility is therefore intrusive. They are a human patch for a communication system that has yet to develop the technology that will make them obsolete. They are not sophisticated enough to be entirely trustworthy but too lively to be mere tools of the exchange.

The messengers here all serve as elements within diplomatic epistolary circuits. Their human frailty is therefore not just a communicative problem but one that lays bare the vulnerability of the human body to the power of the state. The messengers in the Alliterative *Morte Arthur* and *Richard Coer de Lyon* are quite literally – and violently – transformed into texts in service of a diplomatic performance. The brief example here of

Bevis of Hampton further demonstrates that even knights serving as messengers can become vulnerable to the epistolary circuit. Moreover, while the first two examples are about one state asserting independence from or dominance over another, *Bevis* explores diplomatic epistolarity as a point of cultural parity between two groups. The final two examples explore how women who are proximate to power structures but not authorized to wield it publicly can manipulate and subvert bureaucratic textual processes to their own ends. Taken together, these examples demonstrate that these romances of state depict epistolarity as a process that yokes together bodies and texts in the exercise of state power.

Chapter 3

It's Never too Late for Now:
Epistolary Temporality in Medieval Drama

Fiona Apple's 2020 album *Fetch the Bolt Cutters* opens with the song "I Want You to Love Me," a song that sits in an emphatic present-tense, while the speaker meditates on the conditions of an imagined future present and the elasticity of time. After a bassline and clacking percussion establish the beat, Apple's swelling, yearning piano joins in, transforming the beat into a melody, then the text begins as she sings: "I've waited many years / Every print I left upon the track has led me here." The opening lines establishes the speaker in the perfect tense, noting what experiences she is in a present state of having completed. She is, and has been, waiting. She then points to the literal steps that have created the conditions of her present tense, the prints she left upon the track that have led her here, repeating the perfect tense.

The first two lines thus open with the speaker in stasis, considering the actions that have created the conditions of her present tense. The next line jumps to the future, with the singer imagining what her present tense will feel like one year in the future: "And next year it'll be clear / This was only leading me to that, and by that time I hope that / You love me." But this future tense is beguilingly retrospective; in the future "it'll be clear/This was only leading me to that." This imagined future is looking back at the present tense moment established by the first two lines and seeing it as precursor, as another print upon the tracks. The pronouns in this line are especially interesting because

they are primarily deictic – "this" refers to the present tense, but could stand in for any aspect of it. They convey the relative proximity of moments in time: "this" refers to the present moment (which is proximal to the speaker), while "that" refers to a time at least somewhat distant from said present tense and distant from the speaker. Moreover, when Apple imagines the future, she locates her emotional relationship to it in the present: she hopes, in the present tense, *now*, that you love her. The "you" here stretches across six measures; Apple's singing heretofore had been explicitly joined to the beat/pulse, but on this word, which refers to the indeterminate future, she threads her voice across the rest of the music, meanderingly dissonant with the other elements. At the time of the album's release, Apple discussed each song with Vulture, and described the genesis of "I Want You to Love Me" as "a love song to someone I hadn't met yet," gesturing at both the song's capacious temporality and its ambiguous addressee. [158]

The second verse moves from the relationship between the speaker's immediate present-tense and the near future, to a much more distant, universal future. She declares the song's theory of time baldly:

> I know that time is elastic
>
> And I know that when I go all my particles disband and disperse
>
> And I'll be back in the pulse

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[158] As told to Rachel Handler, "The Story Behind Every Track on *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*, Vulture Magazine, April 17, 2020. https://www.vulture.com/2020/04/fiona-apple-fetch-the-bolt-cutters-songs.html

Accessed May 28, 2020

After carefully calibrating the conditions that create specific present tense moments, she suggests that all of these specific moments collapse into a recurrent, eternal "pulse." After this, the speaker remains emphatically in the present-tense, declaring that "I know that you do"; she knows, in the present-tense, that the addressee loves her *now*. This song is not an epistle in the way that this dissertation has defined it thus far, nor is it a dramatic performance in a way that would be at all legible to a medieval audience. However, it gestures at the concepts of contextual temporality that this chapter argues are key to the way that medieval dramas staged scenes of epistolarity. Like the epistolary temporality I discuss below, Apple gives us a momentous present tense, in which the present tense encompasses multiple temporalities.

The goal of this chapter is to examine how dramatic texts depict epistolarity, and how the theoretical priorities of the drama and the letter intersect when these genres interact. I examine four plays: The Digby *Mary Magdalene*, the Digby *Killing of the Children*, *The Pride of Life*, and *Everyman*. Particularly, this chapter looks at the scenes involving epistolarity or the messenger characters. In the Digby *Mary Magdalene,* epistolarity is used to connect the disparate generic modes – biblical history, hagiography, allegory – contained within the genre as well as its imagined geographical spaces, offering diplomatic epistolarity as bridge between genres and cultures. The Digby *Killing of the Children* invents an extra-Biblical messenger figure, Watkyn, who serves as darkly comic relief for the grisly plot. In *The Pride of Life*, the allegorical figure Mirth bounds between the imagined realms of the play and moves outside the bounds of the stage to interact with the audience. In *Everyman*, the most famous of the plays I discuss in this chapter, a messenger delivers the play's prologue, situating the play's depiction of

an allegorical, eternal present within a specific, epistolary present moment. Taken together, the four plays demonstrate that epistolarity offered medieval dramas a means through which to investigate the relationships between temporality, performance, and genre.

The theoretical premises that ground my readings of the scenes of epistolarity in these four plays are as follows. Firstly, epistolarity can be understood as performance. Historians of epistolarity and medieval literacy have argued that letters were more often read publicly and aloud, and that the curriculum for teaching letter-writers, of which the *ars dictaminis* was a part, envisaged this. Letter-writers were trained to imagine the epistolary text as an element within a performance. Understanding medieval conceptions of performativity in this way can help us understand the way that epistolary and dramatic temporalities collide within the dramatic texts in question. Both epistolarity and medieval theatricality rely on what I argue is a *momentous present tense*. My understanding of how this particular sort of present tense works in epistolarity and medieval drama builds upon two critical precedents: Carolyn Dinshaw's work on medieval temporalities and asynchrony, and Keir Elam's work on deixis in theater. I argue that when epistolarity is depicted in drama, the strange temporalities of both drama and the letter come to the fore. They invite us to ask how texts and performances create different kinds of *now*, and how our understanding or experience of a particular present tense is constituted by the interactions of various bodies – be they the textual body of a letter or the human bodies of a messenger or an actor – in motion.

Epistolarity as Performance

Medieval epistolarity was often experienced as a performance, and understanding the historical practices that instantiated letters' composition and delivery allows us to see how this performance drew together various human and textual bodies. Historians of letter-writing practice suggest that letters were often performed upon delivery, by a messenger or other functionary, and that performativity was a recognized aspect of the genre. Martin Camargo asserts that letter-writing curriculum envisaged the likelihood of letters being read aloud: "their typical epistolary experience would have encompassed many more instances of letters as events rather than objects, as public, oral performances rather than private, written exchanges."[1] If we trace the epistolary process step-by-step, we can see that the text that emerges is especially momentous; that is to say, the text draws attention to its own particular and strange temporality(ies). As Camargo has elucidated, the process involved multiple actors, but it also remains insistently in the present tense at multiple moments in time. The sender composes the text - perhaps orally - and dictates the contents to a scribe trained in the *art dictaminis*, who not only transcribes the content but shapes and assembles it according to relevant dictaminal precepts.[159] This letter would likely be informed by and refer to the particular circumstances of the historical moment in which it was composed. Then a messenger traverses time and space to deliver the letter to its intended recipient. At this point in time, the letter – still in the present – tense is performed in another context, within a set of circumstances informed by a new and different historical moment, as it is likely read aloud to its present audience by the messenger or another epistolary functionary. The

[159] Martin Camargo, "Special Delivery: Were Medieval Letter Writers Trained in Performance" in *Rhetoric Beyond Words: Delight and Persuasion in the Arts of the Middle Ages*, ed Mary Carruthers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 174.

letter might then be preserved archivally, projecting the present-tense moment of the text's composition not only into the immediate future of its reception but into a rather more uncontrollable, more distant future. Situating this work on the historical practices of letter-writing in conversation with my readings of the staging of epistolarity in the medieval drama, we can see that the drama was concerned not only with how the letter drew various temporalities into one capacious present tense, but also with how this complicated the drama's insistently deictic, and therefore proximal, present tense. Medieval drama invoked a temporally specific embodiment,[160] and I argue that this is something that the genre had in common with medieval understandings of epistolarity. The letter, acting as a signifying object within an epistolary performance, is in and of itself efficacious. It establishes and instantiates some of the structural relations – those between and among the sender, recipient, and performer - that permit both its signification and efficacy.

Medieval Temporality, Asynchrony, and Deixis

Both medieval drama and medieval epistolarity draw together various bodies in motion and across time. However, the bodies, motions, and temporalities are categorized distinctly in each medium. Epistolarity relies on the conjoined product of human body and text – the cooperation of the epistle and messenger – to move from the locus and

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[160] In Sarah Beckwith's formative monograph on how medieval drama engaged with the theology of embodiment and incarnation, she describes the sacrament in a way that echoes Camargo's discussion of the temporality of the letter's performativity. Namely, she declares, "Sacraments are best understood as actions and not things." This corresponds really quite directly with Camargo's assertion that letters were best understood by those who experienced them as events rather than objects. See Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 59.

moment of its transmission to that of its delivery. Drama uses as its "central resource" [161] the bodies of the actor(s) as well as those of the audience, fixed into two realms of the same place at the same time.[162] Therefore, the present-tense moment, the deictic "now," is distinctly constructed in each medium because of the differences in the relations instantiated between and among the relevant bodies. For the purposes of this analysis of dramatic and epistolary temporality, theatricality relies on the presence of an audience, and a self-consciousness of the work's relationship to the audience. Performativity, however, here accords with Butler's notions and reifies the relations it establishes. For example, the salutation of a medieval epistle, as it is delivered by a messenger, is thus performative, because it seeks to establish the relative statuses of the sender and the recipient. Moreover, both the letter's performativity and medieval theatricality rely on deixis and its invocation of both the present tense and the present bodies.

Medieval drama and medieval epistolarity each invoke a particularly momentous present tense. Carolyn Dinshaw's exploration of medieval modes of temporality is formative for my understand of epistolary temporality, and particularly for my understanding of how medieval drama stages epistolary temporality. Taking her title *How Soon is Now* from the 1984 hit by The Smiths, Dinshaw posits a queer reading of time

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[161] Beckwith, *Signifying God,* 61

[162] The logistics of medieval staging included disparate options: outdoors on pageant wagons on which the players were elevated above the audience; on various scaffolds (the locus and platea); in manorial halls on festive occasions with the audience seated at surrounding trestle tables. For the purposes of my analysis, the specifics of the spatial relations between actor and audience less important than the drama's awareness of both of their existence in the same space. See Meg Twycross, "The Theatricality of Medieval English Drama" in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, eds. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008):

itself, dismantling modernist temporal regimes in the process. The specific temporal theme that Dinshaw advances is "asynchrony," which she defines as "different time frames or temporal systems colliding in a single moment of *now*."[163] She argues that this model of asynchrony is particularly helpful when reading medieval texts because:

> There were numerous and powerful temporal systems operant in the Middle Ages: agrarian, genealogical, sacral or biblical, and historical… Medieval Christianity provides the framework for heterogeneous and asynchronous temporalities on the macro-scale - in all of world history - and the micro-scale, such as in the operations of the individual human mind.[164]

This construction, in which multiple modes of temporality collide into a single present tense, is similar to the way that epistolarity comprises multiple points in time into an especially momentous present tense. For medieval epistolarity, as for Dinshaw, "the present moment of now is full and attached rather than empty and free-floating."[165] The "now" in which the letter is composed, must encompass the imagined future of its delivery, while the "now" in which the letter is delivered, must likewise reflect the past moment of its composition. These temporal collisions are located, in historical practice and on stage, in the body of the messenger.

Epistolarity and theatricality intersect in their use of deixis to establish the relationships between the various bodies in motion, on stage or within the epistolary

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[163] Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 4.

[164] Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now*, 5.

[165] Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now,* 5.

circuit. Deixis "refers to the relationship in time and space between speaker and listener, and any actions or utterances which directly or indirectly indicate the place and time from which they originate."[166] According to theorist Keir Elam, deictic relationships are of "decisive importance to theatrical performance, being the primary means whereby the presence and the spatial orientations of the body are established."[167] The role of deixis in theatricality has received much critical attention, but its role in medieval epistolarity less so. Epistolarity, especially the way it was practiced in the premodern periods, presents a perhaps more complicated set of deictic relationships than theatricality, especially when a messenger is involved in delivering and performing the message's content. While on stage deixis works more seamlessly, since the utterances emerge from the actor's bodies on the stage, the messenger's body works to mediate the relationship between the utterance and its issuer, the letter's sender. As Beckwith argues, theatricality relies on the "central resource of the body of an actor," and the fiction of theatricality relies on the actor's bodies conveying the action on the stage at a particular moment in time. [168] However, in epistolarity – especially as it is staged in medieval drama – the sender, or the message's author, first performs or relays the message to the messenger, whose body traverses time and imagined space to perform the message for a different audience within the performance. Therefore, when epistolary circuits – the movement and performance of a particular message across the bodies of sender, messenger, and recipient – are staged in

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[166] Cormac Power, *Presence in Play: A Critique of Theories of Presence in Theatre*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 192.

[167] Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Drama and Theatre*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1980), 72.

[168] Beckwith, *Signifying God,* 60.

medieval dramatic contexts, the scenes press upon the tensions of these deictic relationships.

Digby *Killing of the Children*

My first two readings deploy the messenger figure as an embodiment of each play's model of epistolary time. Both the Digby *Killing of the Children* and *Pride of Life* draw attention to how the textual and human bodies cross temporal and spatial distances. These readings build on my understanding of the messenger's role in the epistolary circuit as developed in Chapter 2, and suggest that whereas in romances the messenger's physical vulnerability to violence of principal interest (though that concern is still present in drama), the dramas were additionally interested in the messenger's role in facilitating the letter's momentous present tense. The Digby *Killing of the Children* uses a messenger figure to stage epistolary time as a dependent or relative temporality. It's important to consider here the relationship(s) between and among speed, time, and space, as they help to elucidate how epistolary time relies on a relative temporality, one that is dependent upon its distance from other events. While mathematical time is linear, regular, and unidirectional, speed is a ratio, the relationship between time and distance (which is the space between two points). As, according to Elam above, a dramatic context instantiates a particular imagined manifestation of time and space, the concept of theatrical speed becomes more interesting. The audience might experience a speeding up of time, that is to say, the imagined "distance" (here the space between two points in time rather than in space) between events can be imaginatively collapsed on stage. To return briefly to Fiona Apple, time is elastic.

The play opposes epistolary textuality, embodied by the extra-biblical figure, Watkyn, to Biblical textuality, and this allows the play to similarly oppose two different temporal models: time as the audience experiences it in the play and time as construed by the Biblical history of the plot. Watkyn serves as a sort of perverse Mary Sue character,[169] who is the audience's point of entry into the plot and facilitator of the various shifts between scenes. Paying attention to the text's depiction of epistolarity helps us understand the function of this invented character within the play. The Digby *Killing of the Children* depicts Herod's violent reaction to Jesus's birth: he slaughters all children under the age of two in an effort to rid himself of the threat to his realm. However, this play introduces "the darkly humorous extra-Biblical character of Watkyn, who begins the text as a 'messanger.'"[170] Watkyn is obsequious but ambitious and seeks to rise from messenger to knight. Watkyn's service as a messenger emphasizes the physical violence that the role of the messenger invites. Unlike Mirth in the Pride of Life, Watkyn is decidedly not a stellar example of the profession, but like Mirth, he is a source of humor in the play, stitching together the horrifyingly violent action of the drama. He makes the grisly murder of children somewhat more palatable for the audience by offering his own body for performative violence.

The opening of the play establishes Watkyn as the central resource of the play's epistolarity and the centrality of this epistolarity to the bureaucratic machinations of Herod's court. After the Prologue (which in this case is delivered by a "Poeta"), the

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[169] This is a term from fan fiction used to describe the author's self-insert character, who guides the audience to the fictional world and is a vehicle for the plot.

[170] See: mirth, n. MED and solas, n. MED

action of the play opens with Herod contemplating his own lofty status: "Above alle kynges under the clowdys cristalle,/Royally I Reigne in welthe without woo!"[171] The only potential interruption to this pleasant set of circumstances is the news of a potential rival's birth, which is imminently forthcoming. The "straunge kynges three"[172] have failed to return to Herod's court as they were bid, and hapless Watkyn has the unpleasant duty of informing the King of this. Herod demands Watkyn's surveillance of the kingdom thus:

> My messenger, at my commandment come header to me,
>
> And take he[e]d what I shall to the[e]!
>
> I charge the look bought thurgh alle my cuntre!
>
> To aspye if ony rebelles do ageynst oure lay,
>
> And if ony suche come in thy way,
>
> Brynge hem into oure high presens,
>
> And we shalle se them correctid or thei go hens![173]

Watkyn is thus bid to survey the kingdom, allowing his own body to stand in for Herod's and extending Herod's presence throughout the territory. Watkyn is understandably reluctant to deliver bad news to the tyrant, since he perceives that his position as messenger links his physical body to the content of the message he bears. This makes him vulnerable to violence; his body at that moment is teetering on the precipice of its own

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[171] *Digby Killing of the Children*, in *Early English Drama: An Anthology*, ed John C. Coldewey (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), l. 258.

[172] *Digby Killing of the Children*, l. 260.

[173] *Digby Killing of the Children*, ll. 271-77.

destruction. This potential violence invokes a potential future, a conditional future, for his body's damage. This also introduces a dramatic tension in the Biblical story, the outcome of which was likely familiar to its audience. The audience does not know what result will be of this potential violence to Watkyn's body, whereas they would likely know – or could tell from the title of the play – that the children will be subject to violence. This therefore allows Watkyn's body to serve as a vehicle for the play's catharsis, and epistolarity is the framework through which that catharsis will be achieved.

Watkyn's reaction invokes a certain theatricality, as he posits his speech as dependent on Herod's reception of it. He confirms that he has performed his task but vacillates about delivering news that would unsettle Herod's already tenuous emotional balance: [174]

> My lord, your commaundement I have fulfilled,
> Evyn to the uttermest of my pore powere,
> And I wold shew you more, so ye wold be contentid,
> But I dare not, lest ye wold take it in angere!
> For if it liked you not, I am sure my deth were nere,
> And therefor, my lord, I wold hold my peas![175]

Watkyn here suffuses his speech with modals, the linguistic refuge of the cowardly and unsure. While he uses the declarative to state that he has in fact done his job, he hems and haws about what he must tell Herod, using the modal "wold" four times to describe both

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[174] Herod's emotional state throughout oscillates rather wildly between extremes and one could perhaps read the staged emotions here as temporal markers. An emotional state is a phase the body experiences, bounded by points of origin and conclusion.

[175] *Digby Killing of the Children*, ll. 292-97.

his potential message and Herod's potential anger. He thereby almost teases his audience. Crucially, he frames his message in theatrical terms; he "wold shew you [Herod] more" – with a heightened awareness of its present audience, the message is here contingent on its reception – "if it liked you not." This of course echoes Camargo's assertion that letters can be understood as performances, as events rather than only objects.

Herod picks up on this language of showing and he confirms that Watkyn is indeed in physical danger should he be displeased: "I warne the[e], thu traytour, that thu not seas/To shewe every thyng thu knowist ageyns our reverence!"[176] Watkyn then reminds his master about the three "straungere kynges," who lately visited Herod's court and promised to stop by on their return trip from Bethlehem. They did not keep their promise, according to Watkyn, but have rather taken another way home. The audience is left to surmise the reason for their detour, but Watkyn assures his liege, "but by thes bonys ten, thei be to you untrue!"[177] He points to his own fingers as assurance that the message he carries is true, verifying the message with his own body. This is an explicitly deictic gesture (it's rather on the nose, as *deixis* means to point), as Watkyn is quite literally pointing to the body from which his speech is emitting in front of that audience and thereby draws particular attention to Watkyn's bodily presence in that specific moment in time.

Watkyn's subsequent career situates the work of Herod's in terms of the violence it will enact upon the citizens whose bodies comprise Herod's realm. Watkyn begs for a promotion from mere messenger to soldier, asking for the opportunity to inflict Herod's

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[176] *Digby Killing of the Children*, ll. 299-300.

[177] *Digby Killing of the Children,* l. 20.

violence upon the vulnerable, rather than merely being vulnerable to Herod's will himself. After Herod has sent his soldiers off to murder the children, Watkyn spots his opportunity and lingers to request that Herod make him a knight. Herod expresses surprise at Watkyn's ambition:

> Be mi trouthe, Watkyn, woldest thu be made a knyght?
>
> Thus has be my servaunt and messangere many a day,
>
> But thu were never provid in bataile nor in fight,
>
> And therfor to avaunce thee so sodeynly I ne may.[178]

Herod doubts that Watkyn's service as a messenger has prepared him knighthood but offers him a chance to prove his capacity to endure and inflict violence, a necessary prerequisite for knighthood in Herod's service, it would seem. Significantly, Herod makes the same categorical distinction between diplomatic and martial personnel that is apparent in *Bevis of Hampton*. What we can see from this is that epistolary bodies have a specific relationship to the violence of state power. He offers:

> Because I fynde the true in thyn entent:
>
> Forth with my knyghtes thu shalt take the way,
>
> And quyte thee wele, and thu shalt it not repent.[179]

Watkyn gleefully accepts this offer and promises that he will prove a "bold man" - but with one condition - he is afraid of violent women: "But yitt I drede no thyng more thanne a woman with a rokke! / For if I se ony suche, be my feith, I come ageyne."[180]

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[178] *Digby Killing of the Children,* ll. 303-8.

[179] *Digby Killing of the Children*, ll. 153-56.

[180] *Digby Killing of the Children*, ll. 159-60.

Watkyn yet again invokes the possibility of bodily violence as a way to make the future conditional. After Herod scoffs at his fears, Watkyn resolves, "And there come an hundred women, I wole not fleen/But fro morowe tylle nyght, with them I dare chide!"[181] Watkyn does not inspire confidence in his lord, who dismisses him with a speech that focuses on the speed and timeliness of Watkyn's action:

> Thu lurdeyn! Take hede what I sey thee tylle
> And high thee to my knyghtes as fast as thu can!
> Say, I warne them in ony wyse ther blood that thei spille
> Abought in every cuntre, and lette for no man![182]

Because Herod has not assented to Watkyn's promotion, but only allowed him to try his hand at this one bout of infanticide, I think we can still interpret his actions as that of a messenger: he carries the tensions of this role throughout his action in the play. The exchange between Herod, who keeps trying to send Watkyn on his way, and Watkyn, who ironically keeps tarrying in order to assure his lord of his speed and efficacy, is peppered throughout with the temporal adverbs "still" and "until" and "as soon as." This is significant because these adverbs indicate that an action is taking place *in relation to another time*. Therefore, these adverbs suggest that Watkyn's epistolary function has a uniquely relative, or dependent temporality; that is to say, the temporality of an epistle or an epistolary circuit is dependent on other events both within and without the circuit. This perhaps indicates an anxiety about the persistent *present-tense-ness* implied by an epistle - it is always read in the present tense, even when the circumstances to which it refers and

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[181] *Digby Killing of the Children,* ll. 167-8.

[182] *Digby Killing of the Children*, ll. 173-76.

that may have prompted its composition are long past. Watkyn and Herod both rely on these adverbs throughout. For example, when Watkyn describes his plan to avoid wrathful women he says, “I will take good hede tylle she be goon/And as sone as I aspye that she is oute,/By my feith, into the house I wille go anon”[183] and later, “under the benche I wille crepe/And lye stille ther tylle she be goon!”[184] Herod, flabbergasted by Watkyn’s longwinded explanation of his own cowardice, shouts in reply, “Nay, harlott! Abyde stylle with my knightes, I warne thee,/Tylle the children be slayne, alle the hoolle rought!/And whan thu comyst home ageyn, I shall avaunce thee.”[185] Watkyn then speeds off to join the knights who - though mocking him - accept what service he can offer. The adverbs thus explicitly situate this play’s model epistolarity as a performance in concert with and relative to other events.

Watkyn concludes the epistolary circuit and quite literally embodies the message he delivers to Herod. Though Watkyn has his chance to prove himself a knight through this infanticide, he is, as he predicted, soundly beaten by women with their distaffs and must be rescued by the two soldiers. Then the knights escort the battered Watkyn back to Herod to report their deeds, thus fulfilling this pseudo-epistolary circuit. Watkyn’s body internalizes a message at one point in time and space, and delivers it an another, subsequent point. At this point, Watkyn not only relates that the soldiers carried out their assigned task – all of the children have indeed been slaughtered – but also carries back the message from the enraged and grieving mothers. One remarkable thing about the

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[183] *Digby Killing of the Children*, ll. 183-4.

[184] *Digby Killing of the Children*, ll. 187-8.

[185] *Digby Killing of the Children*, ll. 193-5.

speech is that be both reports how the mothers act and its effect on Herod's reputation, as well as conveying their direct quotes. This carries the speech of the women, which occurred in the past, wholesale into the present, maintaining its present-tense-ness. He tells Herod:

> … Thei crie in every stede:
>
> "A vengeaunce take Kyng Herode, for he hath our children sloon!"
>
> And bidde "A myscheff take hym!" both evyn and morn;
>
> For kylling of ther children on you thei crie oute,
>
> And thus goth your name alle the cuntre abought![186]

Significantly, this last line mimics the phrasing of Herod's epistolary instruction to Watkyn at the beginning of the play – that his presence, via diplomatic epistolarity's circulation of his authority and name – go all about the country. This therefore concludes the epistolary circuit initiated at the beginning of the play. The epistolary scenes and the messenger figure in this play becomes the focal point for the text's engagement with dramatic temporality. Reading Watkyn in terms of his epistolary function helps us understand the purpose of this extra-Biblical figure as a participant in the Biblical narrative. Not only is he the vehicle for the play's dark sense of humor, but he inserts a particularly momentous, epistolary temporality into the framework of Biblical history. The momentous present tense of epistolarity as well as the dramatic tension conveyed by the threat of violence to Watkyn's body give the audience a point of entry into Biblical history.

The Pride of Life

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[186] *Digby Killing of the Children*, ll. 360-64

My second example, taken from *The Pride of Life*, similarly uses the messenger figure to stage the play's embodiment of temporality. This messenger, rather than serving as an accessible, ahistorical character who guides the audience through Biblical history, is an allegorical figure working within a broader allegorically structured narrative. Like Watkyn, however, this epistolary figure helps us read this plays engagement with its own imagined audience. Arguably the first English "morality play," *The Pride of Life* includes an example of an allegorical messenger figure, Mirth, whose extraordinary relationship to time and space the play draws to the fore. [187] In this respect, Mirth is like a successful version of Watkyn: his physicality is not the site of violence and incompetence, but rather a nearly superhuman ability to collapse the distances in time and space. The Prolocutor's 112-line prologue or advertisement for the play lays out the action of the play: the King of Life, ignoring the entreaties of his wife and bishop, has sent a messenger to Death with a challenge. The King enters the stage boasting about his strength, asserting, "al the worlde wide to welde at my wil."[188] Goaded by his two flattering knights, Strength and Health, the King wonders who could possibly challenge him, "Qwhereof schuld I drede / Qwhen I am King of Life?"[189] He will live forever, he declares, and brushes off his Queen's pleas to stay within the bounds of his human capacities. Then the King summons

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[187] Klausner, editor of the TEAMS edition of the play, describes Mirth in this context of the play's relationship to other morality plays: "The king's messenger, Mirth, seems positioned to occupy the position of a tempter figure or Vice, such as are found in many of the later moralities, but temptation is not a part of the play's action, and Mirth acts as no more than a messenger" Klausner, "Introduction" in *The Pride of Life*. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications), 4.

[188] *The Pride of Life,* ed. Klausner (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications), l. 122.

[189] *The Pride of Life,* ll. 171-2.

his messenger to bolster his claims. While his enabling knights are allegories of Strength and Health, the King's trusty epistolary agent is a personification of Mirth. The King does not hoard all of his boasts for himself: he introduces Mirth with abundant praise as the most capable messenger:

> …Mirth my messager,
>
> Swift so lefe on lynde?
>
> He is a nobil bachelere
>
> That renis bi the wynde.
>
> Mirth and solas he can make
>
> And ren so the ro;
>
> Lightly lepe over the lake
>
> Qwhere-so-ever he go.[190]

The theme of the King's commendation is that Mirth exceeds the bounds of human nature: his ability to transfer messages across time and space is superhuman but adopts qualities of the natural world: the linden leaf, the wind's ability to move through the air and the roe's running speed. Mirth's history as a messenger, invoking the linear, cumulative mode of temporality inherent in biography, has apparently qualified him to assess the King's qualities, for he has traveled "hen to Berewik opon Twede / And com oyein ful sone"[191] and can attest that "ther is nothing thee iliche / in al this worlde wide."[192] Like Watkyn, Mirth has surveilled the King's territory, transmitting the King's

[190] *The Pride of Life,* ll. 263-70.

[191] *The Pride of Life*, ll. 285-6.

[192] *The Pride of Life*, ll. 287-8.

authority via epistolary diplomacy. For this flattering assessment, the King promises Mirth the earldom of Kent, suggesting that Mirth, in addition to being a preternaturally skilled emissary, is also a rather successful diplomat - in his own interest, at least.

The directions Mirth receives highlight his multimodal physicality. When the King departs, wearied from his displays of self-aggrandizement, the Queen takes Mirth aside to give him an assignment intended to rein in her husband's excesses. The stage directions indicate that this is a private command: "*et tunc clauso tentorio dicet Regina secrete nuncio* [and then with the tent closed, the Queen says secretly to the messenger.]" Mirth here demonstrates his multivalence, as he is able to transfer his function from a public space to a private space and in the service of the King to the service of the Queen. The queen asks Mirth to fetch the bishop to curb the King's pride. Mirth's response emphasizes his ability to modulate his voice:

> Madam, I make to tariying
>
> With softe wordies mo;
>
> For I am Solas, I most singe
>
> Overal qwher I go.[193]

While his "softe wordis" are reserved for interpreting these private, and perhaps dubiously authorized, commands, he will "sing" his message so that it reaches and - given his personification as Mirth or Solas - delights the recipients "overal" he goes. It is, moreover, interesting that in this passage Mirth refers to himself as Solas, perhaps further indicating the multiplicity of personae and functions that he can simultaneously inhabit. While this does invoke the static temporality of allegory, the nominal slippage here

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[193] *The Pride of Life,* ll. 319-22.

allows for Mirth/Solas to occupy two closely related imagined roles at one moment and in one body. Though these two words would seem to be practically synonyms, they refer to two related but distinct emotions: delight, happiness derived from a person, place or thing (mirth); and spiritual joy, or alleviation of discomfort (solas).[194] The emotions derive from two distinct circumstances, one social and the other solitary or spiritual. Therefore, Mirth, like a letter, is signified according to its context. After Mirth departs from the Queen, he begins to address the Bishop in his see, but his speech is cut off by a gap in the manuscript, which picks back up with the Bishop bemoaning the state of the world and then addressing the King directly.

The King's instructions to Mirth indicate that the message has not just a recipient but an audience, and the epistolary message is therefore theatrical as well as performative. The King, having rather flippantly dismissed the hapless Bishop (calling him "bishop babler" and bidding him "fare wel, bisschop, thi way / And lerne bet to preche") calls back Mirth (though he calls him "Solas" this time) to convey his challenge to Death, the necessary end point for the temporal span of an individual human life.[195] While Death is the intended recipient of this message, he is not the only audience, as the King instructs Mirth:

> Loke that thou go fer and nere,
>
> As thou wolt have no blame,
>
> My bannis for to crye

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[194] See mirth (n) and solas (n) MED

[195] *The Pride of Life*, ll. 407 and 449-50.

By dayis and bi niyte;[196]

So Mirth serves not only as a messenger, but as a sort of herald, conveying the King's message throughout the land, rather than merely across a distance, from one place to another. The King concludes his dictate: "Loke that thou go both est and west / And com ogeyne anon."[197] The King here emphasizes Mirth's preternatural ability not only to spread his message, but to return to the court. The messenger here is expressly not an itinerant wanderer.

Mirth's acceptance of the task further conveys that epistolarity compresses multiple temporalities. He assures the King, "Lorde to wende I am prest. / Lo, now I am gone."[198] Mirth opens the line with the infinitive "to wende" expressing the action to be performed in the future, then follows that with the present tense verb construction "I am"; the next line, reverses this order, this time emphasizing an actions *completion* via the past participle ("gone") which this time follows the present tense construction "I am." He thus, in a rather stilted, painfully obvious fashion, cues the audience to temporally shifts in the action of the play: he is ready to go one moment but *now* is gone already. This, I suggest, draws a parallel between imaginary logic of the drama, wherein the audience experiences events that take place over some distance and time within a compressed span of time. Mirth, as an epistolary figure embodying the momentous present tense of the epistolary medium, guides the audience through these temporal shifts.

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[196] *The Pride of Life*, ll. 457-60.

[197] *The Pride of Life*, ll. 467-8.

[198] *The Pride of Life*, l. 469.

To deliver the message, Mirth ventures into and among the audience, demonstrating that dramatic messengers can exceed the geographic bounds even of the stage, even as they embody the drama's compression of temporality. After Mirth declares "I am gone" but before he begins his speech, the stage directions read "*Et eat pla[team]* [and he goes about the place]," so we can imagine him walking throughout the assembled audience.[199] His speech, the verbs of which are resolutely present tense, is remarkably deictic when considered in light of the stage direction. He directly addresses the audience, who are then ineluctably incorporated into the dramatic action: "Pes and listenith to my sawe / Bothe yonge and olde."[200] Mirth here address a (relative) diversity of bodies in the audience, who are now incorporated into both the dramatic action and his fictional epistolary circuit. Much of his speech's introduction focuses on identifying his role in relation to the King, clearly establishing the rhetorical situation of the message, which conveys the King's intention into the present time and place:

I am a messager isente
From the King of Life'
That ye she schal fulfil his talente
On peyne of lym and lif.[201]

Then Mirth expounds upon the extent to which the audience is bodily beholden to the King and upon the bodily consequences they might face for disobedience:

His hestis to hold and his lawe

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[199] *The Pride of Life*, l. 470.
[200] *The Pride of Life*, ll. 471-2.
[201] *The Pride of Life*, ll. 475-78.

Uche a man on honde;

Leste ye be henge and to draw,

Or kast in hard bonde.[202]

Then, using phrasing that mimics Mirth's and other characters' descriptions of the messenger's ability to traverse the realm, Mirth comments on the physical extent and boundaries of the King's jurisdiction:

Ye wittin wel that he is king

And lord of al londis

Kepere and maister of al thing

Within se and sondis[203]

The parallels between the discussions of the king's jurisdiction and the messenger's travels ties the messenger's physical body to the authority of the king. Not only does this link clarify the bonds owed by the audience to the King, but it also performs the work that the *ars dictaminis* would require of the introduction of an epistle, to clarify the power dynamic between sender and recipient. Once Mirth finishes identifying himself and introducing his lord, he begins delivering the King's challenge to Death. The manuscript cuts off before Mirth can finish his speech, but we can observe from what remains that Mirth tweaks the challenge rather significantly. Rather than searching for Death and challenging Death specifically, Mirth phrases the King's challenge as to all potential comers, up to and including Death:

I am sente for to enquer

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[202] *The Pride of Life*, ll. 479-82.

[203] *The Pride of Life*, ll. 483-86.

Oboute ferre and nere

Yif any man dar werre arere

Agein such a bachelere. …

Thegh it were the King of Deth

And he so hardy wer[204]

Thus, Mirth restages the King's challenge to Death, drawing the audience in by implicating them in the challenge. The audience therefore becomes a potential recipient of the letter, and their present bodies are roped into the challenge, and thereby into the action of the drama. By staging the mechanisms of the epistolary circuit, the play draws together the experiences of receiving a letter – or witnessing its reception – and watching a play, offering both as contingent experiences of a particular present tense. Seeing the play through the lens of epistolary temporality allows us to see how the play engages the audience in its action, using epistolary performativity to draw the audience into the action of the play.

Digby Mary Magdalene

The Digby Mary Magdalene stages epistolarity in multiple generic contexts; an epistolary circuit appears in a historical, geopolitical context and is then mirrored in an allegorical context. As these two genres offer different modes of temporality and embodiment, the epistolary actions reflect these differences. Paying attention to the epistolarity in this play allows us to appreciate more fully how it stitches together multiple genres and temporal modes. We can see how the medieval drama used embodied textuality – in the form of the messenger in this case – to absorb the audience into the

[204] *The Pride of Life*, ll. 487-90.

action and to guide them through generic shifts as well as imagined temporal and spatial jumps. Political history envisions time as a series of linked, linear events, while allegory is more of a static metaphor, with the bodies of actors standing in for abstractions of the World, Flesh, as well as the seven Vices. Allegory has a way of freezing time, fixing abstract concepts into one textual "space." Dramas that stage these abstract concepts in the bodies of actors in motion on a stage highlight a tension between dramatic and allegorical temporalities. Moreover, the epistolary circuit conducted in the play's historical realm emphasizes the letters as efficacious documents, while that taking place among the allegories highlights the messenger's body. The relationship between body and text, the relative status of each, thus changes according to which generic mode the play is deploying; epistolarity, in the figure of the messenger and the through the epistolary circuit, guides the audience through these changes.

Described as "one of the most eclectic and ambitious projects of the late medieval stage,"[205] the Digby *Mary Magdalene* is preserved in only one copy, the same sixteenth century manuscript – Digby 133 – as the previous play, *The Killing of the Children.* One of several Middle English versions of Mary Magdalene's vita, the narrative engages with several genres: allegory, hagiography, travel narrative, and conversion narrative. [206] The

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[205] Theresa Coletti, "Introduction" in *The Digby Mary Magdalene*, ed. Theresa Coletti. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), 1.

[206] Other examples of Mary Magdalene's vita are included in *Middle English Lives of Female Saints,*ed. Sherry L. Reames (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003). Key texts are those by Osbern Bokenham, (see *Legends of Holy Women*, ed. and trans. Sheila Delaney (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1992)) and John Mirk (*Festial*). Carter discusses the play's adaptation of these narratives in "The Digby Mary Magdalene: Constructing the *Apostola Apostolarum*" *Studies in Philology* 106.4 (2009), 402–19.

play traces the saint's life, from her temptation by vice, to her redemption and spiritual ministry of others. While the *Killing of the Children* worked to demonstrate epistolary time as relative, epistolarity works in this particular play as a bridge between the various realms – generic and locative – established on the stage.

The early scenes of the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, which situate the titular heroine's coming-of-sainthood within a transnational network of bureaucratic interactions, emphasize the way that rulers rely on letters to exert their authority and extend their will into their far-flung dominions. These scenes of epistolarity stress the ability of the document to enact and bolster the power relationship between the sender and recipient. Critics have discussed the play's overall concern with the efficacy of documents, demonstrating what Hyunyang Kim Lim terms an "anxiety about written documents and textual authority," and its "dramatic representations of the circulation and signification of public, political writing" situates the play "within the larger realm of late medieval documentary culture."[207] I suggest that it is epistolarity's capacious relationship to time and space ground this particular play's engagement with this documentary culture. The play thus comments on the ability of the document, the bureaucratic epistle in this case, to circulate among and connect seemingly disparate genres, geographies, and temporalities. Focusing on epistolarity in the play allows us to see how the play moderates the relationship between textuality and embodiment through these generic shifts.

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[207]Hyunyang Kim Lim, "Pilate's Special Letter: Writing, Theater, and Spiritual Knowledge in the Digby Mary Magdalene." *Medieval and Early Modern English Studies* 22 (2014), 2.; Coletti, "Introduction," 5.

The play opens at the Roman court of Emperor Tiberius, whose status anxiety takes focus as he spends tens of lines declaring himself sovereign of sovereigns and requiring his provost and scribe to make a full audit of his realm to ensure the unencumbered exercise of his power. He achieves this through epistolary texts and by means of epistolary personnel – calling on his provost, scribe, and messenger to convey his bidding. In a rather rare instance, the play depicts a more comprehensive suite of epistolary personnel, explicitly staging the writing of the letter by a separate functionary, a scribe, or here "provost" before it is given to the messenger to deliver. As the Emperor dictates:

> Take hed, thou provost, my precept wretyn be,
>
> And sey I cummaund hem, as they woll be owit wrech,
>
> Yf ther be ony in the cuntré ageyn my law doth prech,
>
> Or ageyn my goddys ony trobyll tellys,
>
> That thus agens my lawys rebellys,
>
> As he is regent and in that reme dwellys,
>
> And holdyth his croun of me be ryth,
>
> Yff ther be ony harlettys that agens me make replycacyon [208]

The conditionals in this speech are rather muddled – does the Emperor wish Herod and Pilate to punish those who disobey him or does he warn Herod and Pilate that harm will come to those who disobey him? We might imagine that, following the pattern of epistolary dictation and mediation that Camargo laid out, the provost was responsible not only for transcribing the Emperor's dictations, but also for interpreting and filtering the

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[208] *The Digby Mary Magdalene*, lines 120-128

message according to dictaminal precepts. Thus the epistolary personnel have a hand in the authorship of the letter, rather than merely its transcription. After the provost has ensured his emperor that he has successfully recorded the message and that "of all this they shall have informacyon, / So to uphold yower renoun and ryte,"[209] the Emperor turns to his messenger, ordering:

> Now, massengyr, withowtyn taryyng,
>
> Have here gold onto thi fe.
>
> So bere thes lettyrs to Herowdys the kyng,
>
> And byd hem make inquyrans in every cuntré,
>
> As he is jugge in that cuntré beyng.[210]

The Emperor here emphasizes the speed with which he expects the messenger to perform this this delivery, and also assigns him a performative role upon the delivery: the messenger is to supplement the text with a speech, bidding Herod and Pilate to make enquiries in their respective jurisdictions. The messenger's reply affirms that he will complete the task and also emphasizes his speed, saying it will be done "ful redy/in al the hast that I may" and that he will nat spare nother be nyth nor be day."[211] The play's focus on the messenger's speed and timeliness guides the readers through the generic shifts, and prepares them for how the generic translations moderate the relationship between textuality and embodiment contained in each generic realm.

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[209] *The Digby Mary Magdalene*, lines 129-30

[210] *The Digby Mary Magdalene,* ll. 131-5

[211] *The Digby Mary Magdalene*, ll. 136-7 and 139

The play's depiction of the messenger's receptions adheres to the conventions of the *ars dictaminis* and draws attention to the physical media involved in the transaction. The messenger travels to both Herod and Pilate, soliciting their respective compliance with the Emperor's command. The messenger enters each of these epistolary scenes by speaking aloud the letter's address to its recipients, which hails the recipient according to his lists of titles "prynse of bovntyowsnesse" and "reytyus rewlar in thi regensy" for Herod and "jugge of Jherusalem" for Pilate.[212] Rather than simply relaying the contents, the letters are significant objects here: they are explicitly mentioned in the stage directions. In the Herod scene, they read "*Here he shall take the lettyrs onto the king*," while the directions in the Pilate scene give the actor instructions for the emotion with which he must react to the letters: "*Her Pylat takyt the lettyrs with grete reverens*."[213]

These scenes of imperial epistolarity translate from the historical realm to the allegorical realm of the play, as the King of the World and King of Flesh – who according to the stage directions are on separate stages – exchange communiques via a messenger who traverses the two dramatic spaces. The King of the World summons a messenger, in this case another allegorical figure, "Sensualyte," again like Mirth an allegory of a sensation or emotion that emphasizes interpersonal communication and congress, which is appropriate for a messenger figure.

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[212] This accords with dictaminal precepts: dictaminal treatises spend a rather exuberant amount of time discussing, in granular detail, how these addresses should be worded, and how the status of each participant dictates the form of address that the letter should include.

[213] *The Digby Mary Magdalene*, ll. 217 and 25

The King emphasizes speed as he summons his messenger, “In alle the hast that evyr they mown,/Com as fast as he may ryde.”[214] The messenger’s speed is indeed superhuman as he appears at the next line, declaring that he will produce the King of Flesh, in the flesh and on stage, “ryth sone in presens ye shal him se” and that his work is to extend the will of the King of World across the stages “your wyl to fulfille her.”[215] Crucially, the manifestation of epistolarity is less textual and more personally embodied in the allegorical realm, while imperial, historical realm emphasizes the efficacy of documents. For example, do not see an explicit exchange of texts between the messenger and the recipients, but rather the messenger internalizes the sender’s will and manifests it by means of his own physicality, the speed that the participants in the exchange emphasize. This difference is important to recognize because it suggests that different genres construct the relationship between texts and bodies according to their own particular ends.

Not only do epistolary circuits set in motion the dramatic actions of the play, but epistolary changes move the play between its various genres. The *Digby Mary Magdalene* is a strikingly idiosyncratic text, drawing together generic patchwork of allegory, hagiography, travel narrative, and conversion narrative into a coherent drama. Its tone vacillates between comic (there’s a rather silly tavern scene) and deeply sincere. The exchange of letters not only provides a way for the audience to visualize these potentially jarring shifts, but the letters themselves hold meaning within these distinct generic realms. We can see from this that medieval dramas used epistolarity not only to

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[214] *The Digby Mary Magdalene*, 391-2

[215] *The Digby Mary Magdalene*, lines 396-7

facilitate the plot but also to comment on how particular genres like history or allegory construe the relationship textuality and embodiment.

Everyman

The final example in this chapter is the most famous and widely studied of the four plays studied, and its dramatic depiction of epistolarity is also distinct from the other three. Rather than using a messenger figure as a character within the narrative, on the body of whom the play places the tensions and intersections between dramatic and epistolarity time(s) and who facilitates the various temporal and locative shifts in the play, in *Everyman* the messenger delivers the play's prologue. The messenger thus grounds the play's allegorical mode of temporality, which is static and eternal, within an epistolary temporality, which is specific yet momentous. Reading the play in light of its engagement with epistolarity shows us how the drama works to prepare the audience for the allegory, how it gives the audience the tools to translate the play to their own particular, individual lives.

Everyman, an English version of the Dutch play *Elkcerlijc*,[216] is a paradigmatic morality play. Most of the characters are allegories of abstract external and internal human qualities: death, fellowship, cousin, goods, good deeds, knowledge, beauty, strength, discretion, five wits, and the titular Everyman. The headnote for the play summarizes its dramatic action: the Father of Heaven sends Death to summon every

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[216] The Dutch *Elckerlij* dates to 1485 and is "one of hundreds of surviving Rederijkers' (rhetoricians') plays, which were encouraged and supported in the low countries by local Chambers of Rhetoric from the second quarter of the fifteenth century until the beginning of the seventeenth" See Coldewey, 43.

creature to come and "gyve accounte of their lyves in this world."[217] Everyman, having been so summoned by Death and told he is to die and face judgment, is allowed to find a companion for the journey. Everyman turns to each of the allegories in turn who prompt him to reflect on the conduct of his life. Fellowship, Kindred, and Cousin all refuse him. Good Deeds, weakened by Everyman's inattention to her in life, cannot come along at first, but along with her sister Knowledge, takes Everyman to Confession. Everyman, absolved of his sins, is then accompanied by Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five Wits to take the sacrament. They too abandon him once they realize his journey will end in Death. Even Knowledge cannot follow him when he no longer has a physical body. Finally, accompanied only by Good Deeds, he steps into his grave and dies; they ascend into Heaven, welcomed by an Angel, and a Doctor provides a moralistic epilogue to the play.

While the doctor closes the play, the Prologue is delivered by a messenger. While we might not interpret the Messenger here as a character - he does not interact with any other characters but rather speaks directly to the audience, he is like the other messengers discussed here in that he serves a deictic function and calls attention to the compression of temporalities that inflect both genres: drama and epistolarity.

The messenger's speech focuses on the relationship between the present moment or the present tense and a permanent or eternal condition. He opens by directly addressing the audience:

I pray you all gyve your audyence,

And here this mater with reverence,

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[217] *Everyman*, ed. John C. Coldewey (New York: Routledge, 1993), l. 1.

By figure a morall playe.

The Somonynge of Everyman called it is,

That of your lyves and endynge shewes

How transytory we be all daye.

This mater is wonder[ous] precyous;

But the entent of it is more gracyous,

And swete to bere awaye.[218]

Notably, the direct address persists to line five, when he insists that the play shows "your lyves and endynge," thereby more fully implicating the audience in the action and message of the play. In the next line, however, he uses the first-person plural pronoun to yoke his own body with that of the audience in his description of both as "tranystory." Furthermore, the beginning of the speech – like that of the other dramatic messengers in this chapter – is resolutely present tense. The sixth line, however, uses the infinitive "be" right before "all day," before returning to the present tense in the next line. Thus, the present contains the eternal, even grammatically speaking. The messenger then proceeds to relay the moral thesis of the forthcoming play:

The story sayth: Man, in the begynnynge

Loke well, and take good heed to the endynge,

Be you never so gay!

Ye thynke synne in the begynnyng full swete,

Whiche in the ende causeth the soule to wepe,

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[218] *Everyman*, ll. 1-9.

Whan the body lyeth in claye.[219]

There is again a slight conflict between the verb tenses here. While all are putatively present tense, there's a mix of imperative and declarative moods, so the present-tense-ness itself is varied. The imperative implies that the command will be carried out in perpetuity, that man ought to begin and continue to care about his death at the moment of his command. The content of the command - that the addressee ought to consider his future death in this continual present, also demands that the audience compress various temporalities into one present.

Here shall you se how Felawshyp and Jolyte,

Both Strengthe, Pleasure and Beauté,

Wyll fade from thee as floure in Maye;

For ye shall here how our Heven Kynge

Calleth Everyman to a generall rekenynge.

Gyve audyence, and here what he doth say.[220]

This final passage shifts briefly into future tense and then ends with an imperative. This opening allows epistolarity - and the mode of temporality exhibited in that genre - to inflect our understanding of the play. The insights to be gleaned about human nature, writ large, as the abstractions interact on stage are available to any audience at any time, because this allegory does not present Fellowship or Beauty as historically or temporally specific. Indeed, the universality of the play's aims is fairly explicit from the title. The epistolary prologue, however, reminds that specific audience, the one to whom the actor

[219] *Everyman*, ll. 10-15.

[220] *Everyman*, ll. 15-21.

playing the messenger is currently speaking, of their individual, temporally specific experience of the play. The play uses epistolarity to prepare its audience for the allegory to follow. Reading the prologue in terms of its epistolarity helps us to interpret the function of the prologue, as the prologue uses the momentous present tense of epistolarity to encourage the audience to accept the moral instructions contained in the universal, eternal allegorical mode of the drama.

Conclusion

The four plays examined in this chapter invoke different genres – allegory, Biblical history, geopolitical history, the morality play – as they stage scenes of epistolarity, but the depictions of the epistolary circuit press upon the tensions drawn between time and space within both genres. The dramas, I suggest, use the epistolary present tense, which I argue is an especially momentous present tense, to explore the challenge of a theatrical present tense. The plays often locate these tensions in the body of the messenger and its imagined physical relationship to the message, whose task often mimics that of the medieval actors, the semiotics of which theorists like Sarah Beckwith have fruitfully explored. Watkyn, Herod's bumbling but evil messenger in The Digby *Killing of the Children*, consistently invokes a potentially violent future for his own body, while Mirth's biographical past is invoked to prove his speediness, his extraordinary relationship to time and space. The messengers in The Digby *Mary Magdalene* connect the various genres and imagined locales, both geographical and allegorical, drawing them together into one narrative. In final example, *Everyman*, the prologue, delivered by a messenger, translates the eternal, static present of the allegory to the more immediate, specific present tense experienced by the audience watching that play at that precise

moment. The messenger figures in these plays guide the audience through temporal shifts, as well as the plays' jumps between generic modes and imagined geographical locations, and thus help us understand how medieval drama incorporated and addressed its audience.

Chapter 4

The "I"s Have It:

The Epistolary First Person in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and Gower's *Cinkante Balades*

The super-stabbed body rose up, with many
butterknives sticking out of it, and said" I AM
the mail."

…

at last in their bedrooms they
sighed with relief as they shook out their sacks
with both hands, and faithfully and affectionately
and yours tumbled out, and even I am tumbled out.

In Patricia Lockwood's poem, "Why Haven't You Written," the mail becomes frighteningly sentient. The many various letters that many various first-person senders trod across their pathways to their mailbox to send have all coalesced into one "great white avalanche" and one "super stabbed body" that astonished the postman. The body, which is comprised of so many distinct first persons, sits up and coalesces all of these disparate first-person pronouns into a capacious singular: declaring "I AM the mail." When the singular body is dispersed to its various recipients, the first person is modulated by its relationship t0 the letter's recipient; the poem draws attention to the conventions of epistolary leave-taking, which "tumble out" into the recipients' hands. The adverbs "faithfully" and "affectionately" can be taken as alternately modifying the pronoun

"yours." The first-person sender thus characterizes in what manner it belongs to its recipient, whether fidelity or affection governs the nature of the relationship between sender and second-person addressee. The last clause in this excerpt – "and even I am tumbled out" – centers the first-person pronoun and its declaration of existence yet again. The poem thus offers the epistolary first person as capacious, yet relative; it can absorb multiple imagined persons but is moderated by its relationship to the addressee, the you, the second person.

In medieval epistolarity, I argue, the epistolary first person, as constructed by the *ars dictaminis*, is shifting and constructed, mediated by situation and context. This chapter examines the theoretical construction of the first person in the medieval *ars dictaminis* and situates this understanding within linguistic theorizations of forms of address, particularly that of Emile Benveniste, and critical discussions of how the first person appears in medieval literature. In the *ars dictaminis*, which, as I have argued throughout the dissertation, offers epistolarity as a circuit that circulates meaning across the human and non-human bodies involved in the letter's composition and delivery, the first-person pronoun is similarly relational. The first person assembles itself in relation to the other bodies within the circuit. I apply this understanding of the epistolary first person to readings of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and Gower's *Cinkante Balades.* I chose these two author examples because they offer two distinct functions of the epistolary first person. Both authors stage the epistolary relationship – between sender and recipient, first and second person – within the context of love poetry. In the *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer offers a selection of doomed love stories, in which the narrator takes up the part of the scorned heroine. Gower's *Cinkante Balades*, on the other hand, offers a pastiche of

a love affair, in which the lovers map their relationship onto epistolarity. Chaucer uses the first-person pronoun to draw attention to the way he disperses subjectivity across several imagined bodies. Gower, on the other hand, offers a first-person pronoun whose significance is determined by its relationship with the second-person pronoun, the text's "you," in this case, the object of the narrator's love. Love and its delineation of lover and beloved, subject and object, "I" and "you" overlaps theoretically with the relationship between sender and addressee in medieval epistolarity.

The First Person in Theory

I have discussed more fully in the previous chapters how the epistolary circuit circulates the process of a letter's composition and signification across multiple bodies. The first-person pronoun is therefore also circulated across these multiple bodies. Thus, the first-person pronoun might be adopted in turn by the letter's "author" (or, more specifically, the sender, the person whose name and specific identity append the letter), the scribe who might (as we saw in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*) might have a hand in composing as well as recording the content, the messenger whose body bears the first person pronoun across time and space to its destination, and the reciter (who may be the same person as the messenger), who recites the content, thereby performing the first person pronoun. The theorizations of epistolarity in the *ars dictaminis* pick up on this concern and describe the capacity of this pronoun. An anonymous letter-writing manual, *Rationes Dictandi,* attributed to thirteenth-century Bologna defines a letter in terms of its ability to encapsulate the intent of the sender, the *delegans*,

> Est igitur epistola congrua sermonum ordinatio ad experimendam *intentionem delegantis* institua. Vel aliter epistola est oratio ex constituis sibi partibus congrue ac distincte composita delegantis affectum *plene significans* (italics mine).
> [An epistle or letter, then, is a suitable arrangement of words set forth to express the intended meaning of its sender. Or in other words, a letter is a discourse composed of coherent yet distinct parts signifying fully the sentiments of its sender.][221]

In this description the role of the letter is to document the intent of the sender. The title attributed to the sender, *delegans*, is crucial here as the participle can mean the one *entrusting* or *assigning*. That the participle (and the sense of both translations) is transitive is also important, as the letter is then both the intent itself and the means of conveying the intent. The intent is separate from the person of the author, but the author has control of the intent through the document of the letter. The letter is imagined as *plene significans,* which explicitly gestures at the possibility of an ideal signification. This indicates that the dictaminal treatise imagines that the letter *can* convey the author's truth perfectly. This is contingent, however, on the letter's object, the addressee, understanding the subject's meaning. The letter's subject is only legible if the relationship is reciprocal, that is, if the object is capable of understanding or of signifying the letter's contents. Therefore, the first person created by an epistolary text is fundamentally relational, dependent upon the addressee and also, as the other chapters have demonstrated, the other bodies whose work facilitates the epistolary circuit.

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[221] Anonymous of Bologna, *The Principles of Writing,* in *Three Medieval Arts,* trans and ed. Murphy, 7.

Many linguistic theorizations of the first person similarly regard the "I" of a given text or utterance as relational. For example, Emile Benveniste's work on the polarity between the first and second person pronouns "I" and "you" is formative for theoretical conceptions of linguistic and textual subjectivity. Benveniste defines "I" as "the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing I."[222] Moreover, the first person is defined by the specific circumstance of its utterance: "this instance is unique by definition and has validity only in its uniqueness ... I can only be identified by the instance of discourse that contains it and by that alone."[223] Therefore the first person, and the text – or in the case of this chapter, the letter – in which that pronoun appears are mutually constitutive. He defines you, "by introducing the situation of 'address,' we obtain a symmetrical definition for you as 'the individual spoken to in the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance of you.' These definitions refer to I and you as a category of language and are related to their position in language."[224] In epistolarity, the categories denoted by the first and second person pronouns are not just linguistic or textual, but also material and mediated, but they also define modes of interaction with the physical object of the text. The "I" sends the text, while the "you" receives it. They do not just receive the content, but crucially, a material object. This context is essential even when a depiction of an instance of the epistolary first person does not foreground the letter's materiality.

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[222] Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics,* 28.

[223] Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, 30.

[224] Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, 30.

If Benveniste examines the first person as a linguistic phenomenon, A. C. Spearing explores what characterizes the textual first person, advancing an argument for grouping the medieval[225] English examples of "first-person writing in which there is no implied assertion that the first person either does or does not correspond to a real-life individual" as a supergenre that he terms "autography." [226] While Spearing does not explicitly address epistolarity, his discussion of the mode of subjectivity created by the textual first person is still helpful for my conception of the epistolary first person. Spearing's analysis of the first person and deixis, "one of the most important means by which subjectivity is encoded in language" takes care to differentiate the way these features work in text rather than speech:

> The first-person pronoun works differently in writing from the way it works in speech. In this it is like deictics, those lexemes often called 'shifters,' which have no fixed referential meaning but are used in the spoken language to indicate persons, objects, or events in their relation to the speaker – their spatiotemporal relation and thus by extension their epistemic and emotional relation … When I *write* "I" the word does not emerge from anyone's mouth and its deictic function – the energy of pointing, looking, feeling, imagining – is freed for a wider variety of expressive purposes.[227]

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[225] Spearing's corpus of medieval autographies spans the Conquest to the Reformation.

[226] A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Autographies: The "I" of the Text* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 7.

[227] Spearing *Medieval Autographies*, 10.

It is important therefore to distinguish between the deictics operant in text and on the stage, as discussed in the previous chapter. Whereas onstage, the deictic utterances emerge from the body of the actor, literally embodying and performing the energy of pointing, looking, and so on, the "I" of a premodern letter – and most letters, generally – does not emerge directly from the body of its referent, but is rather deferred and mediated, often by the body of a messenger. Spearing's conception of deixis here also emphasizes that written deixis is used to invoke spatiotemporal relativity.

Spearing's work untangles some modern assumptions of textual subjectivity, and imagines medieval constructions of the first person, the "I" of the text, afresh. He asserts, "the purpose of the centrality of the first person in medieval poetry is not usually to establish the perspective of an individual 'speaker' but rather to capture the general effect of experientiality."[228] Thus, the medieval first person must be understood on its own terms, rather than in the terms of later conceptions of the first person or of subjectivities. This is, in general terms, similar to the project of this dissertation, as I seek to decouple the medieval letter from our modern preconceptions about the genre and understand it in its own terms. How does the epistolarity first person, which often does refer to a specific person, real or fictional, interact with this notion of autography? If Spearing is attempting to "unthink" modern assumptions about the first person (which he describes as "the unquestioned dogma that the textual first person must necessarily give voice to an individual human consciousness") and approach the medieval first person on its own terms, I attempt to do the same thing with medieval epistolarity.[229] If we forget the

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[228] Spearing, *Medieval Autographies,* 24.

[229] Spearing *Medieval Autographies,* 51.

totalizing paradigm of humanist letters and eighteenth-century epistolary novels and their insistence that epistolarity conveys a representation of a specific, individual subjectivity, how must we reassess the medieval epistolary first person?[230]

It is useful to consider the medieval lyric here, as it is the genre most often associated with the first person and has also therefore been used to ground critical explorations into medieval textual subjectivities. Both the *Cinkante Balades* and the *Legend of Good Women* have been examined in such terms, as both texts explore how a first person experience can be encoded in text. Ingrid Nelson tackles Hegel's "durable assertion" that the lyric is an essentially subjective "genre."[231] Much as a letter does, the lyric "takes as its subject its own composition and projects its future reception."[232] Therefore, the first person of the lyric, like that of the letter, imagines itself as contingent upon its addressee and the circumstances of its reception. Moreover, the medieval English lyric, like medieval English epistolarity is intertwined with and related to bureaucratic culture and the – often first person – documents produced therein. Ingrid Nelson situates medieval English lyrics against the background of English documentary culture. Nelson asserts, "rather than appropriating institutional textual practices to gain

[230] The body of scholarship surrounding epistolarity in prose fiction, especially, in the 17th and 18th centuries is extensive. See *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), ed. Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven,; Gary Schneider *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500-1700* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005); Mary Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics, and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[231] Ingrid Nelson, *Lyric Tactics: Poetry, Genre, and Practice in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 16.

[232] Ingrid Nelson, *Lyric Tactics*, 3.

legitimacy (in the form of authority, for example), lyrics deploy them tactically, exploiting their potentialities, multiplicities, and ambiguities that strategic proscriptions attempt to unify, streamline, and regulate."[233] One of the key interventions that Nelson makes to situate the lyrical first person against the background of documentary culture. Therefore one could say that the epistolary first person, which emerges from and is theorized in documentary culture, and the lyrical first person are mutually constitutive, or at least tactically similar, to work in Nelson's terminology. If we see the *ars dictaminis* as also participating in and theorizing aspects of documentary culture – as I suggest we should – then we can see similar interests in and constructions of the first person across these generic boundaries.

In medieval theorizations of epistolary the first person can be read as a response to, or a construction of, the media conditions of the epistolary circuit. Produced by a shifting set of relations between and among bodies, both human and non-human, the epistolary first person as envisioned by the *ars dictaminis* is fundamentally relational. Medieval poets like Chaucer use this capacity of the epistolary first person to stage the tensions between various versions of a narrative. Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* deploys the epistolary first person in the text's restaging of events and characters from Ovid's *Heroides*, complicating narrative "voice" and textual authority. Gower's *Cinkante Balades*, on the other hand uses an epistolary framework for a series of ballads, "working with the metaformal potential of the envoy."[234] The first-person speaker of the ballads

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[233] Ingrid Nelson, *Lyric Tactics*, 15.

[234] Ardis Butterfield, "Afterword: Forms of Death" *Exemplaria* 27.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2015), 178.

meditates on how the subject-object relationship, that between the first-person sender and second-person recipient is mutually constitutive. Comparing the first person in these two poems allows us to see not only how epistolarity shaped literary conceptions of the first person subject position but also how each text deploys this convention in order to articulate the text's own theorization of love.

"Love poem back to your subject": The capacious first person in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*

> … The someone
> was out at sea, and language on my shoulder like
> claws of a parrot. I sailed the world over
> to deliver one letter, one letter of even one letter,
> one word, and one word as we used to use it:
> in those days she was the only Lady, in those days
> she wrote a small round hand,
> and I hauled on it saw it fly loop by loop out of her.[235]

Patricia Lockwood's "Love Poems as We Used to Write Them" seems to imagine – like the "super stabbed up body" of the mail in "Why Haven't You Written" – that an antique love poem has been resurrected or animated and is flitting between self-recitation and extemporaneously musing aloud on its own, now outdated, generic preoccupations. It moves its lady between forms of address and the subject and object positions. The opening line, "Says here is a girl who gets written like palms," illustrates this: the verb opens the poem with a missing subject, which locates (using the deictic adverb "here") the girl in a proximate position; then, in the relative clause, the poem assigns her a verb phrase "gets written" that works as a sort of middle voice (as in Greek) construction: the

[235] Patricia Lockwood "Love Poems Like We Used to Write" in *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexual* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 37.

"get" certainly implies more agency than "is" would, but the subject is also not actually imagined to perform the action – the writing. The action is *almost* reflexive. Later, after a digression about the diachronic semantic consistency of the word "parrot" the narrator chides, "Love poem back to your subject, the word *parrot* / is not the right woman for you."[236] This plays on the duality of subject: as both topic and first-person subjectivity. The poem can escape and return to this subject position. Lockwood reflects on the love poem's relationship to the lyric, locating this kind of love poem "in the days before voice meant something you write with."[237] If the writing displaces its speaker's voice, the poem also stages the spatiotemporal distance between sender and recipient – the "someone out at sea."[238] The poem also gestures at the love poem's imagined universality – "she was the only Lady" and ends with an image of this Lady writing by hand and the narrator, which as I take to be the love poem itself, pulling the writing, the text out of her, as if its hauling up the chain of an anchor.[239]

Chaucer's narrator in the *Legend of Good Women* similarly attaches himself to the imagined woman writer of love poetry. He thus almost ventriloquizes his subjects, adopting their first-person pronouns and almost speaking in their stead. In Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, the narrator shifts into imaginary epistolary first person. He disperses the subjectivity through a courtly, rhetorical game. Not only does the narrator stage his own occupation of the heroine's epistolary first person, but he offers himself as

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[236] Lockwood, "Love Poems Like We Used to Write," 38.
[237] Lockwood, "Love Poems Like We Used to Write," 38.
[238] Lockwood, "Love Poems Like We Used to Write," 39.
[239] Lockwood, "Love Poems Like We Used to Write," 39.

one of several male "authors" to have occupied these roles. The *Legend of Good Women* positions itself as a corrective to Chaucer's previous work, *Troilus and Criseyde*. The dream vision prologue follows the narrator as he is chastised by the God of Love and his queen, Alceste for maligning his followers and works and assigned a penance "for thy trespass" he must compose:

> … a glorious Legende
>
> Of Gode Wommen, maidenes and wyves,
>
> That weren trewe in lovinge al hir lyves;
>
> And telle of false men that hem bitrayen,
>
> That al hir lyf ne doon nat but assayen[240]

The narrator, whose relationship to the historical Geoffrey Chaucer is the subject of much critical discussion, therefore sets out to relay the lives of the following "exemplary" women, and to make them fit the specifications of the challenge: Cleopatra, Thisbe, Dido, Hypsipyle and Medea, Ariadne, Lucretia, Phyllis, Philomela, and Hypermnestra.[241] The *Legend* self-consciously engages with classical sources, the most significant of which for my purposes are Ovid's *Heroides*. The *Heroides* are a collection of fifteen epistolary poems, written in elegiac couplets from the perspectives of mythological heroines to their

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[240] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, ll. 134-39.

[241] See William Quinn, *Chaucer's 'Rehersynges': The Performability of the* Legend of Good Women (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994); Florence Percival, *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Nicola F. McDonald "Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* Ladies at Court, and the Female Reader" *The Chaucer Review* 35.1 (2000): 22-44; Helen Cooper, "Chaucer and Ovid: A Question of Authority" in *Ovid Renewed: Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Sheila Delany, *The Naked Text: Chaucer's* Legend of Good Women (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

absent, disappointing lovers. A further collection, the double *Heroides*, include poems from the perspectives of both lovers. Five of these women, and their letters, make their way into Chaucer's *Legend*: Phyllis, Dido, Hypsipyle, Medea, and Ariadne. Demophon fails to return to Phyllis in the allotted time. Aeneas seduces Dido, relies on her political assistance, and then leaves her for Italy. Jason seduces, relies on, and abandons first Hypsipyle and then Medea. Theseus lets Ariadne guide him through the labyrinth and then deserts her on an island. Each woman composes the letter upon realizing her lover's betrayal, and the letter's efficacy (its ability to retrieve the lover for the woman) is always in doubt, if not explicitly described in the text as impossible. Examining the text's engagement with epistolarity, particularly with the precepts of the *ars dictaminis*, allows us to revisit the critically well-trod grounds of the Legend's engagement with classical sources. We can see that epistolarity moderates the text's adoption of the classical heroines as first person subjects.

Each narration of the women's lives disperses the events through a variety of voices and grammatical persons; this shows that the text's conception of subjectivity is shifting and capacious. The letters appear uniformly at the end of the text, after the narrator has nodded to his classical sources and offered his own narration. Lynn Arner understands the letters' positioning as undermining their significance to the narrative: "because the flaccid missives appear after the action has played out, the letters operate largely as chronicles of events after the fact."[242] What does the epistolary first person achieve against this background of literary authority? I suggest that the text posits the

[242] Lynn Arner, *Chaucer, Gower, and the Vernacular Rising: Poetry and the Problem of the Populace after 1381* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press), 133.

epistolary first person as a participant within a network of signification. This does not dramatize or represent the epistolary circuit – that is to say, the legends do not necessarily depict the composition, delivery, and reception of the letters – but rather reiterates the position of the epistolary first person within that circuit, as situational and relative. The instances of epistolarity in the *Legend of Good Women* below, specifically in the legends of Dido, Hypsipyle and Medea, Ariadne, and Philomela, provide representative examples of this phenomenon. The "Legend of Dido" offers the first person as contested authorial territory, as its occupant shifts between the narrator, his classical sources, and the eponymous heroine. The tale of Hypsipyle and Medea similarly toggles the reader between the two women as well as the source, attempting to render an unspeakable event legible. Ariadne's narrative is, uniquely so among the *Legend*'s adaptations of the *Heroides*, imagined as an oral performance. The legend of Philomela offers something close to a depiction of an epistolary circuit, as the tapestry depicting Philomela's rape and mutilation is delivered to her sister Procne via messenger.

The "Legend of Dido" depicts the heroine's epistolary first-person contribution to her legend after the classical sources have all had their say. The text also complicates the occupant of that first person; it could refer to the fictional representation of Dido or to Chaucer's classical source. The narrator makes his reliance upon classical authorities clear from the outset of his narration:

> Glory and honour Virgil Mantoan,
>
> Be to thy name, and I shal as I can
>
> Folow thy lantern, as thou gost biforn,
>
> How Eneas to Dido was forsworn.

In thyn Eneide and Naso wol I take

The tenour and the greet effectes make.[243]

This passage demonstrates the impossible allegiances that Chaucer invokes in his own narration of the Dido myth. He swears to follow Virgil for five lines and then only briefly mentions that he will also be using Ovid ("Naso") as a source. As the two classical *auctores* create contradictory accounts, following both at once is pragmatically impossible. Thus, Chaucer's text destabilizes its own relationship to its predecessors. Chaucer's narrator often breaks in, mentioning when he is editing his sources to suit his own purposes. Of Aeneas's travels, he declares, "But of his aventures in the see / Nis nat to purpos for to speke of here, / For it acordeth nat to my matere."[244] Later he cites time as a reason for cutting out Dido's backstory, "It nedeth nat, it nere but los of tyme."[245] This constant invocation and denial of his sources inscribes their contradictions and contentions into the text. The effect of this is to overwhelm the logic of the text. The text purports to represent Virgil's Dido, Ovid's Dido, and Chaucer's Dido, but that very supposition makes any of the claims impossible, as well as rendering impossible any attempt to conceive of *the* Dido, or even *a* Dido. Dido's epistle then enters the account at a chaotic moment of competing narratives. The effect of this is to overwhelm the epistolary first person that appears emerges toward the end of the narrative. To whom does the "I" refer? Are we to imagine Ovid uttering the "I" or Chaucer's narrator, or does it refer to the fictional character of Dido?

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[243] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women,* 924-29.

[244] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women,* 953-55.

[245] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women,* 997.

The epistolary first person in the "Legend of Dido" enters the narrative after Dido's suicide is described. The narrator pauses after relating Dido's suicide to revise the timeline and include her letter: "But as myn auctor seith, right thus she syede,/Er she was hurt, bifore that she deyde/She wroot a lettre anoon."[246] The parallelism of "auctor seith" and "she syede" is particularly interesting, as the "auctor" – Ovid – and the fictional Dido govern the same verb with different temporal aspects. Ovid's relation of the narrative is in the eternal present tense "seith," while Dido's exists more specifically in the past, "syede." This suggests that the Dido created by the Legend and her rendition of events is historically specific, relegated to the past, while the source exists in an eternal, iterative present tense; thus Dido's first person authorship of her life and the classical source's third person narration are temporally opposed.

Chaucer's "Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea" attempts to render one of the most gruesome episodes in classical myth according to the parameters set by Alceste and Cupid in the Prologue. The narrator seems to handle this quandary by overtly and emphatically asserting himself as the occupant of the epistolary first person, while also hinting at his perhaps more forthcoming rivals for this position: the women themselves. Medea's vengeful infanticide poses an obvious challenge to the deity's mandate to compose tales of good women betrayed by men. The narrator censors his own version of the Jason myth and avoids directly mentioning the infanticide. He declares the event unspeakable, but gestures at the women's imagined epistolary narrations thereof. After the narrator claims he's following Guido delle Colonne for Jason's backstory in Thessaly, he then moves on to Ovid for his Hypsipyle interlude, marking his transition thusly, "Al

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[246] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women,* 1352-54.

be this nat rehersed of Guido / Yet seith Ovide in his Epistles so." Interestingly, the first source is rendered passively, it is characterized as the text in which the material is *re*produced, whereas the second source *could be* imagined as actually uttering the following narrative, actively "saying" the letters so. The narrator here suggests that the first person of the letter is not Hypsipyle but Ovid; the "I" of the letter is thus rather capacious, referring to multiple possible voices: those of the male authors and of the fictional Hypsipyle.

Ariadne's letter is different from the rest of the letters in the collection because the narrator imagines it as orally performed before telling us that it is a letter; this distinction draws attention to the multimodality of epistolarity as well as to the deictic function of the first person. This reverses the precedent set in Dido's legend and in Hypsipyle and Medea's. While in those legends, we are told from the outset that the epistolary first person could refer to the fictional heroines or to the classical sources, in Ariadne's case we experience the whole "letter" as a sort of oral performance, before the Legend's narrator offers the possibility that the "I" we have just experienced could in fact refer to Ovid.

> What shal I telle more hir complaining?
>
> It is so long, it were an hevy thing.
>
> In hir epistle Naso telleth al[247]`

In the first line, the "complaining" is Ariadne's, but in the final line, the ownership is confused: first it is "hir epistle" but then we are told it is Ovid, or Naso, who is the one telling it. Again, the narrator conflates Ariadne and Ovid, offering them both as possible

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[247] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, 1218-20.

referents for the epistolary first person here. Moreover, we are left to wonder if Ariadne is the "author" of the vocal, embodied performance of the letter, while the sources claim authority of the material "text" of the letter. Or perhaps each claims a share of each instance? The precise relationship between the performance and the performed object/text is brought to the fore yet left undetermined, and so too the categories of author and performer, writer and speaker.

In the "Legend of Phyllis" the narrator draws attention to his own translation and editing of Phyllis' letter. This legend follows the pattern set by the Legend of Dido, wherein the letter, the subject's first-person narration of events, is preceded by the subject's suicide. When the narrator first relates her death, he draws attention to the sources: "Allas, that as the stories recorde / She was hir owne deeth right with a corde / Whan that she saw that Demophon hir trayed."[248] Immediately after this clause, which gives us the time of her death, linking it to the moment of her perception of Demophon's betrayal, the narrator backs up and returns to the moment before her death: "But to him first she wroot."[249] The conjunction, "but" here is significant, I think, as it situates the letter that follows in opposition to the preceding narrative. Thus, as in Dido's tale, the letter is in some opposition to and serves to revise our understanding of the narrative. The narrator – who has earlier described himself as positively sick ("I am agroted herbiforn"[250]) of writing about those who are betrayed in love – twice insists that he will only relate "a word or tweyne" of Phyllis' letter, drawing attention to his editorial function. He ascribes the words to Phyllis, however, marking her direct speech with

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[248] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, 2484-6.
[249] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, 2487.
[250] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, 2454.

"quod she."[251] After fifteen lines, the narrator interrupts Phyllis' first person epistolary narration to yet again draw attention to his authorial intervention. He complains that her letter is both too long and too revealing, "Hir letter was right long and therto large."[252] Next he explains the nature of his authorial intervention, declaring "But here and there in ryme I have it laid / Ther as me thought that she wel hath said."[253] He has not only clipped her letter, but puts it into a different rhyme scheme (as well as translating it English, of course). Moreover, he ascribes the approved turns of phrase to Phyllis herself, offering her some imagined textual authority, and uses a verb "said" that could encompass both writing and/or speech. Having made this clarification about his editorial interventions, he gives Phyllis the narrative voice again, returning to her first-person narration, for the next forty lines and in closing refers briefly to the letter's imagined delivery, noting that Phyllis died "whan this letter was forth sent anoon."[254] The first person pronoun here is therefore not only occupied by multiple persons, but exists in multiple modalities.

The closest that the *Legend of Good Women* comes to depicting an epistolary exchange is in the "Legend of Philomela." As with the "letters" derived from the *Heroides*, this pseudo-epistle comes at the end of the legend but is within the original narration rather than revising it post facto. The legend follows Ovid's timeline of events. After Tereus rapes and mutilates his sister-in-law, Philomela, he leaves her in a cave and returns to his wife, Procne, and tells her that her sister perished on the journey. Philomela

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[251] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, 2496.
[252] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, 2515.
[253] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, 2516-7.
[254] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, 2555.

weaves a tapestry narrating Tereus' crime and conspires to send it to her sister via messenger. The delivery of the tapestry takes the form of an epistolary circuit, with Philomela engaging a "knave" to act as her messenger, offering him a ring for his trouble and instructing him in his task "by signes." When the messenger arrives to deliver the tapestry to Procne, he supplements the epistolary text-object, the tapestry rather than a letter in this case, with an explanation of its circumstances "al the maner tolde."[255] Thus, the text and the performance have distinct "authors" here, with Philomela composing the "text," but the messenger supplying the voice – as Philomela's faculty for speech has been violently taken from her – to transform the tapestry's content into speech, emphasizing the multimodality of the epistolary circuit, and the interdependence of the bodies involved in the circuit.

Taken together, these readings of the epistolary first person in the *Legend of Good Women* demonstrate that Chaucer used the epistolary first person as a contested site for the conflicting textual authorities. In this way, the *Legend* pushes on the capacity of the epistolary first person, as it is theorized in dictaminal treatises such as the *Rationes Dictandi*, pressing on the ability of the first person to contain or at least refer to the multiple authors and multiple modes of authorship within the tales; Chaucer thus deploys epistolary theory and conventions as a way of destabilizing the narrative control and theorizing authorship. Reading the shifting first person of the *Legend of Good Women* therefore allows us to reframe the debate about the text's engagement with classical sources and its theorization of the vernacular's relationship to classical authors.

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[255] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, 2372.

Love and Epistolarity: Some Theoretical Overlaps

If the first half of this chapter explores how the epistolary first person manifests in medieval poetry and is rendered as rather capacious, the second half of the chapter considers the epistolary addressee, the second person, in the context of Gower's *Cinkante Balades*. In this text the variety of love conveyed is determined by the recipient or object of that emotion as well as the context in which that object is addressed. In this way, love mimics epistolarity, in which the status of the letter-writer is determined by the addressee. To develop this notion, I turn very briefly to a scene from the 1996 film The English Patient, in which the film's star-crossed protagonists meet for the first time and clash over semantics. After meeting Ralph Fiennes's Count Laszlo de Almaszy, Kristin Scott Thomas's Katharine Clifton remarks that having read the Count's tome, she is curious to meet the man who wrote "such a long book with so few adjectives." Almaszy retorts, "Well, a thing is still a thing, no matter what you put in front of it." Katherine replies, "Love? Romantic love, platonic love, filial love? Quite different things, surely."[256] While Katherine ascribes the role of modifying or characterizing these different forms of love, what the adjectives actually point to here are the objects of that love: love of a romantic partner is fundamentally distinct from love of a platonic friend from love of a child. What *really* determines the kind of love in this construction is the relationship between subject and object.

Sara Ahmed's discussion of love in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* similarly foregrounds this polarity in her exploration of the relationship between subject and object in amatory relationships. For Freud, love grounds the formation of subjectivity. In

[256] Anthony Minghella, *The English Patient.* (United States: Miramax, 1996).

Ahmed's reading of Freud, "love then becomes a form of dependence on what is 'not me,' and is linked profoundly to the anxiety of boundary formation, whereby what is 'not me' is also part of me."[257] Ahmed takes as her starting point, "this distinction between self-love and object love, which can also be described in terms of a distinction between identification (love as being) and idealization (love as having)…. What is at stake, then is the apparent separation of being and having in terms of objects, *but their contiguity in terms of subject position.*"[258] In the *Cinkante Balades* this is also the concern: the first person lover does not easily distinguish between the action of his loving and the object of his beloved. Reading this text in light of the theorizations of the subject and object relationships in epistolary treatises allows us to see more clearly the way that the subject of an epistolary document is shaped by his or her relationship with the object. We can then appreciate more fully the varieties of love described in the *Cinkante Balades.*

Gower's lover is, rightfully as it turns out, concerned about the reciprocity of this relationship and what effect the actions or reactions of the addressee, the object of his love, will have upon his subject position as the lover. Ahmed's conception of love encompasses the tensions of love's imagined or potential reciprocity. At what pole of the subject-object relationship is the emotion of love located? With the subject? With the object? Somewhere in between? She asserts:

> Indeed the impossibility that love can reach its object may also be what makes love powerful as a narrative. At one level, love comes into being as a form of reciprocity; the lover wants to be loved back, wants their love returned. At

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[257] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 125

[258] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 127

> another, love survives the absence of reciprocity in the sense that the pain of not being loved in return – if the emotion 'stays with' the object to which it has been directed – confirms the negation that would follow from the loss of the object.[259]

The tension here between the presence and absence of reciprocity in the experience of love is key and corresponds to a tension in epistolarity between the potential presence and absence of the letter's intended or imagined recipient. Reaching the sender is the imagined purpose of the letter, but the letter exists whether the circuit is completed or not; it survives the failure of reciprocity. While the letter's signification does not demand that the recipient also send a letter, it does demand, or at least imagine, that the intended recipient engage, affectively and intellectually, with it. So, epistolary reciprocity does not imagine that all participants perform the same action or function, but instead that each body participate in the circuit, fulfilling the role assigned to them within the circuit. The letter is a text-object that is always reaching out to the circumstances, events, and bodies involved in its circulation.

Gower's *Cinkante Balades* and the Epistolary Love Object

In Gower's *Cinkante Balades* love is mapped on to epistolarity, with the epistolary relationship between subject and object standing in for and exploring the relationship between subject and object constructed by love. In this depiction of both epistolarity and love, the addressee/object, the second person is construed as having power in the signification of both the epistle and the emotion. Many of the *balades* close with a specific reference to the mechanics of the epistolary circuit, with the sender noting that he is sending the letter in lieu of his bodily presence, ("ceo letter en ceo me serra

[259] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 128.

messagiere [This letter to her will be my messenger]" "En lieu de moi ceo letter vous aporte" [In place of myself this letter I give you]").[260] As Yeager summarizes, the *Balades* "approaches love and its assorted quandaries from a variety of perspectives… Gower offers a narrative of an (ultimately unsuccessful) love affair as seen *en pastiche* through the eyes of a first person lover whose poems to and about his lady explore the range of his feelings."[261] According to Yeager, the structure of the collection is as follows:

- A dedication to addressed to Henry IV opens the collection. Notably, the first person pronoun is occasionally plural here (with Gower speaking for all of Henry's subjects), while the recipient is, necessarily, specified and singular.
- I-IV are dedicated to a particularly premarital bond, as a marginal note declares" sont fait especialement pour ceaux q'attendont lours amours par droite marriage [are made especially for those who wait on their loves in expectation of marriage]." This note indicates that there is an imagined audience beyond the recipient.
- V–XLVII trace the lovers' narrative, "intended as a kind of tutelary drama, his feelings and poetic language providing exemplary lessons in the sensations, art, and uncontrollable outcomes of an affair."[262] The affair takes place over about a year and a half, and the letters mark the passage of time by noting at their outset

[260] Gower, *Cinkante Balades*, III, 23; XVIII, 24
[261] R. F. Yeager, "Introduction" in *Cinkante Balades* (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS, 2011), 1.
[262] Yeager, "Introduction," 3.

the context of their composition; for example, several of them are composed at and inspired by St. Valentine's day.

- XLVIII–L are less grounded in the fictive affair, but more philosophically speculative.

The trajectory of the poem thus locates the love affair and the epistolary conduct thereof within a philosophical and political context. The experience and manner of love then shifts according to the context and theoretical framework in which it is depicted. The opening, with the dedication to Henry, manipulates some epistolary features – the form of address, in particular – removed from the particular media context of epistolarity. This dedication does *not* imagine the scene of its own reception, nor does it refer to a messenger or its own materiality. Moreover, the dedication opens with the plural first-person pronoun, identifying the sender(s) by their political subject position, as Henry's vassal, before Gower identifies himself as the author. The final few poems abandon the epistolary fiction somewhat, as well as the first-person pronoun. In LI "the 'I' returns to claim both voice and sentiment" and brings "closure to the sequence by redirecting love away from mortal women."[263] Thus, the conclusion of the series is marked by the abandonment of and return to the first person, and the shift of the object as well, from mortal women to the Virgin Mary. The series thus frames the particularly epistolary love relationship, with the lover sending letters to the beloved, within two other semi-epistolary pairings. This emphasizes the relativity and interdependence of the two positions of subject and object.

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[263] Yeager, "Introduction," 3.

The series opens with a dedication to Henry IV and a description of a subject's love to a king, which Gower translates from one genre and language to another. This grounds the relationship between the lovers within a particular social, political context, as the first person is not just in an amatory relationship with his beloved, but his first person subject position is also shaped by the political realities of his allegiance to a particular monarch at a particular sociohistorical moment. The text opens:

Vous frai service autre que je ne fis,

Ore en balade, u sont les ditz floriz,

Ore en vertu, u l'alme ad son corage:

[I do you a service different from what I have done before,

Now in balade, where the flower is of poetry,

Now in virtue, where the soul has its heart][264]

Gower describes his love for the King as generically, and temporally shifting; *now* it is in "balade" and by the next line it is *now* in "vertu." He also links his love and his text together, describing both as his "service." In the later *balades* addressed to his lover, the narrator similarly ties his emotion together with the imagined body of the epistle. Gower follows this with an address to the King in Latin.

The *balades* allow the sender to imagine his letter in explicitly embodied terms, as an extension or replacement for his own body. In the first poem addressed to his beloved, the narrator equates the imagined epistle with his own body, namely his heart:

Par cest escrit, ma dame, a vous me rens:

Si remirer ne puiss vo bele face,

[264] Gower, *Cinkante Balades*, "Dedication" lines 18-20.

Tenetz ma foi, tenetz mes serementz;

Mon coer remaint toutditz en vostre grace.

[By means of this writing, my lady, I give myself to you:

If I am unable to look again upon your fair face,

My faith holds, my oaths hold;

My heart remains always in your grace.][265]

The writing, both as process and object, stands in metaphorically for the love between the first person and addressee. Interestingly, the writing itself "cest escrit" – note the deictic "cest" [this] – governs the participle "rens," which in turn takes the first person as the object "me" and the second person as the indirect object "a vous." The lover is thus rendered passive in this construction of the emotional and the epistolary relationship. The narrator locates his emotional experience within his beloved's control, with the epistolary addressee thus determining the nature of the emotional correspondence between the two.

In a later ballad, the lover attempts to parse his own emotions, and he is yet again rendered rather passive, even while occupying the first-person subject position.

D'ardant desir celle amorouse peigne

Mellé d'espoir me fait languir en joie;

Dont par dolçour sovent jeo me compleigne

Pour vous, ma dame, ensi com jeo soloie.

Mais quant jeo pense que vous serretz moie,

De sa justice amour moun coer enhorte,

En attendant que jeo me reconforte.

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[265] Gower, *Cinkante Balades*, I.25-29

[This loving punishment of burning desire

Mingled with hope sickens me with joy:

Thus from sweetness often I complain

On your account, my lady — just so am I accustomed.

But when I think that you will be mine,

My heart exhorts Love for its justice,

Awaiting the time when I shall be comforted.][266]

The first four of these lines depict the lover as passive, being worked upon by aspects of love. Once he imagines attaining his beloved, once she becomes his, she disappears from the lines, which focus on his experience of love. The first lines lay out a collection of emotions as subcategories of love: burning desire ("ardent desir"), hope ("espoir"), joy ("joie"), sweetness, ("dolcour"). These experiential aspects of love similarly render the subject passive, burdened with the paradoxical experience of an amorous pain. Interestingly, the verbs that the lover governs are those of expression and perception: he complains, he thinks, his heart exhorts. In "jeo me compleigne" the action of complaining is reflexive: the lover occupies both subject and object positions.

Notably, the passage in which the relationship is rendered in the most mutual terms, the beloved is described in the third person, rather than as the addressee. In balade V, the language of reciprocity and exchange abounds:

Jeo sui tout soen et elle est toute moie,

Jeo l'ai et elle auci me voet avoir;

Pour tout le mond jeo ne la changeroie.

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[266] Gower, *Cinkante Balades*, III. 1-7.

[I am completely hers and she is all mine

I have her and she also wishes to have me;

For all the world I'll not exchange her.][267]

The parallelism of the first line allows both the lover and his beloved to occupy the same position. The verbs here are not transitive, so neither is governing the other, grammatically speaking. In the second line however, the verb is the transitive "to have," rendering their relationship as one of mutual possession. The parallelism is consistent, emphasizing the reciprocity of the relationship here. Notably, the first line offers love as "being," while the second offers love as "having," which corresponds with Ahmed's theorization of love. The third line uses the notion of exchange, which relies on a presumed or agreed upon parity between the objects being exchanged.

It is perhaps fitting to conclude my exploration of medieval epistolarity with this assessment of the function of the first person and its distinction from what we would perhaps call subjectivity. While our modern notions of subjectivity (which often proceed from the experience and genre of the novel and other long-form genres) relies on a relatively stable conception of selfhood, we can see that medieval epistolarity reject such stability in favor a dynamic interchange between and among bodies. What is important in epistolarity is not individual bodies or texts but the points of contact and connection between texts and bodies. For Chaucer these points of contact are between the subjects of his tales – the imagined heroines – and the various sources that inform and construct their life stories. For Gower, the first-person subject exists and is constructed within its relationship to the object of its love. These readings demonstrate the flexibility and

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[267] Gower, *Cinkante Balades*, V. 6-8.

capaciousness of the epistolary first person and that medieval authors pressed on the implications of this capacity as they explored the dimensions and experiences of love.

Conclusion

Taken together, these chapters demonstrate that epistolarity provided medieval writers and thinkers a vehicle for addressing issues of textuality, embodiment, and to depict and confront historical processes of textual signification and collective meaning making. Reading the *ars dictaminis* as a media theory can open up readings of literary depictions of epistolarity, and that medieval epistolarity offered a way of theorizing a mode of textuality that dispersed and created meaning across a range of bodies and elements.

Not only does each genre adapt the element of epistolarity that speaks most to that genre's theoretical preoccupations, but reading epistolarity in terms of media and mediation can help us understand medieval genres and their engagements with textuality and embodiment. Focusing on the seals also allows us to see how the hagiography adapted bureaucratic tools and objects within its own generic conception of textuality and embodiment. Paying attention to the ways the seals work shows us how hagiographical texts use objects in concert with textuality as efficacious, testamentary tools. The messenger's body is a site of anxiety in romance, and my reading of the *ars dictaminis* and its theorization of the epistolary circuit explains why that is ithe case. Reading the scenes of epistolarity in these texts shows us how romance as a genre constructed national identities and attended to the processes of statecraft through the interdependence of textuality and embodiment. Some romances, like the Alliterative *Morte Arthur* or *Richard Coer de Lyon*, use the epistolary circuit as a means of one state asserting

independence from or dominance over another. Others, like *Silence* or Gower's "Tale of Constance" explore how the epistolary circuit can be hacked and subverted by those who do not have access to direct bureaucratic technologies of power. Taken together, these examples demonstrate that these romances of state depict epistolarity as a process that yokes together bodies and texts in the exercise of state power.

Dramas uses the momentous present tense afforded by epistolarity to explore the challenge of the theatrical present tense. The plays often locate these tensions in the body of the messenger and its imagined physical relationship to the message. The messenger figures in these plays guide the audience through temporal shifts, as well as the plays' jumps between generic modes and imagined geographical locations. The first person would seem to be the most static and least embodied element of the epistolary circuit. However, my readings of two distinct deployments of the epistolary first person, in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and Gower's *Cinkante Balades* show that the epistolary first person is contextual, and circumstantially mediated. The first person is shifting and capacious, responding to and shaped by the other elements and bodies within the epistolary circuit.

In the introduction, I suggested that the medieval conception of epistolarity, emerging from a pre-print culture is perhaps more accessible to us as we begin to disentangle ourselves from centuries of print being the overwhelming paradigm for textuality. Similarly, the medieval letter, in which meaning comes about through the dynamic interactions and exchanges between various human and non-human bodies, is as much post-human as it is pre-human. The waning of the *ars dictaminis* both in England and on the continent coincided with the emergence of humanism, and, indeed,

humanism's insistent focus on individual expression does seem inimical to medieval epistolarity's collaborative and dispersed process of signification. The relationship between the early humanists and rhetorical disciplines has been discussed by Paul O. Kristeller, who asserted that the early humanists were essentially rhetoricians.[268] However, as Ronald Witt responds to Kristeller, "only when the nature of the *ars dictaminis* is made clear can we understand the extent to which the older movement contrasted with the newer."[269] I argue that the nature of the *ars dictaminis*, and its fundamental distinction from humanism becomes more clear when we read the *ars dictaminis* as, in part, a theorization of epistolary media, and of the relationships that the medieval letter establishes between and among its various users. The bodies involved in the exchange of medieval letters are all porous and dynamic, coming into signification at points and moments of contact with one another. Studying medieval epistolarity can thus prepare us for our post-print, posthuman media landscape.

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[268] Paul O. Kristeller, "Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance" *Byzantion* (1944-45), 345-374.

[269] Ronald Witt, "Medieval 'Ars Dictaminis' and the Beginnings of Humanism: A New Construction of the Problem" *Renaissance Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (Spring, 1982), 3.

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VITA

Elise Broaddus is a medievalist, whose work incorporates rhetoric, media studies, and posthumanism. She attended the University of Kansas for her undergraduate degree, majoring in both English and Classical Languages and graduating in 2012. She still considers herself a recovering Classicist. She earned her MA from Mizzou in 2014 under the supervision of Dr. Emma Lipton. Her MA thesis examined epistolarity, authorship, and classical reception in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*. She returned to the topic of epistolarity for her dissertation, though from a revised theoretical framework, using posthumanism and media studies.

An Army brat, she spent her childhood shuttling between various military installations across the US South and, briefly, Germany. She rode horses growing up, competing in show jumping competitions but now has a keen sense of her own mortality and is too nervous for much beyond trail rides. She is a television completist and is particularly devoted to Bravo's *Real Housewives* franchise. Her cat, Julius, is astoundingly handsome and regal.