



# L'ÉCRITURE PRAGMATIQUE

## UN CONCEPT D'HISTOIRE MÉDIÉVALE À L'ÉCHELLE EUROPÉENNE. CEHTL, 5

PRAGMATIC LITERACY AND POLITICAL  
CONSCIOUSNESS IN LATER MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

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MOTS-CLÉS : ÉCRITURE PRAGMATIQUE, LITERACY, ANGLETERRE,  
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Résumé : Cet article examine l'impact profond du concept de *pragmatic literacy* sur les méthodologies des médiévistes. Une attention particulière est portée sur ce que cela a apporté aux historiens de la culture politique qui cherchent à mieux comprendre la nature de la conscience politique durant cette période.

*Abstract : This article examines the profound impact that the concept of pragmatic literacy has had on the research methodologies of medievalists. Particular attention is given to the insight it has afforded historians of political culture who seek to better understand the nature of political consciousness in this period.*

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## Pragmatic Literacy and Political Consciousness in Later Medieval England

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In recent years, Anglophone scholars have increasingly recognized the utility and importance of pragmatic literacy, as a concept which allows for new insight into the way in which medieval societies interacted with texts. The scholarship which first introduced the idea of pragmatic literacy to an English-language audience was published in the 1970s. Malcolm Parkes and Michael Clanchy in particular firmly established the idea of studying medieval literacy, and in so doing they introduced many historians to research which had previously been the domain of social scientists<sup>1</sup>. In the last decade or so, the Münster University pragmatic literacy project and the « Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy » series, have also been increasingly influential, reaching a wide audience with much of their scholarship translated into

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1. M. B. PARKES, « The Literacy of the Laity », in *The Medieval World*, ed. D. Daiches and A. Thorlby, London, Aldus, 1973, p. 555-577 ; M. B. PARKES, *Scribes, Scripts and Readers : Studies in the Communication, Presentation and Dissemination of Medieval Texts*, London, Hambledon Press, 1991 ; M. T. CLANCHY, *From Memory to Written Record : England 1066-1307*, London, E. Arnold, 1979, 3rd ed., 2013.

English<sup>2</sup>. The first section of this article provides a review of these developments in Anglophone scholarship, in order to elucidate the profound impact pragmatic literacy has had on research methodologies. The second section then focuses on the particular insight it has afforded historians of medieval political culture who seek to better understand the nature of political consciousness in this period. The outdated assumption that past societies without print cultures and mass literacy lacked wider political awareness has long been rejected. Instead, new research into the production and use of medieval manuscripts, into the symbolism of the text and into « textual performance » has shed new light on questions surrounding medieval political consciousness.

### *1973-1997 : Anglophone Scholarship*

Before the work of historians such as Malcom Parkes and Michael Clanchy in the 1970s, the impetus for utilising concepts like pragmatic literacy had come from social scientists. In 1963, the publication of the anthropological study « The Consequences of Literacy », co-authored by Jack Goody and Ian Watt, established writing as a central component of historical change<sup>3</sup>. They argued that the human mind was reorganised by the process of learning to

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2. <http://www.uni-muenster.de/Geschichte/MittelalterSchriftlichkeit/Welcome-e.html#Projekte> ;  
<http://www2.hum.uu.nl/Solis/ogc/medievalliteracy/USML.htm>.

3. J. GOODY and I. WATT, « The Consequences of Literacy », *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 5/3, 1963, p. 304-345.

read and write and that documents greatly increased « the possible alternative ways of thinking and behaving »<sup>4</sup>. Thus literacy could prompt new forms of social and political life. When, in the 1970s, Parkes and Clanchy began to write about medieval literacy and disseminated these concepts to a wider audience of historians, both of them acknowledged their debt to this kind of anthropological scholarship. Malcolm Parkes's research into the literacy of the laity established the concept of the « pragmatic reader », who possessed « the literacy of one who has to read or write in the course of transacting any kind of business »<sup>5</sup>. Parkes argued that from the twelfth century, lay literacy was characterised by a steady growth of literacy among the « expanding middle class », linked particularly to the pragmatic demands of commerce, administration of landed estates and the legal profession<sup>6</sup>. Increasingly, this growing group of people were not only reading written records but were also writing, editing and amending them, an idea that has now become a commonplace of Anglophone scholarship. For Parkes, the question was not whether there *were* literate laymen, but how far they used this literacy outside of professional activities, a question he explored through the study of composite manuscripts comprising booklets of formularies for commerce and recreational reading, bound together in the same volume<sup>7</sup>. This evidence that pragmatic readers looked beyond their « immediate professional horizons » to other genres of

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4. J. GOODY and I. WATT, « The Consequences of Literacy », *op. cit.*, p. 343.

5. M. PARKES, « The Literacy of the Laity », p. 555.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 557-558.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 562.

writing, represented the really profound shift in medieval literacy, a process which he thought began in the thirteenth century. By the end of the Middle Ages, these developments had also contributed to the rising popularity of literature written in the vernacular<sup>8</sup>.

Six years after Parkes published his work on the literacy of the laity, Michael Clanchy's book, *From Memory to Written Record*, unequivocally established the 'breadth and unity' of the medieval experience of documents<sup>9</sup>. This book, recently published in its third edition, is the best known of the works on literacy in medieval England. It has become a staple of university reading lists and it features in the footnotes of a wide array of subsequent historical scholarship. What Clanchy set out to do was to deal with all types of writing, and to expand his study « from the writings themselves to the people they affected »<sup>10</sup>. He also warned against historians being prejudiced in favour of literacy. Like Parkes, Clanchy focused on the growth of literacy for practical purposes : literate laymen dealing with writs from government; gentry involved in administration at the county level and peasants who acted as manorial reeves. Essentially, he argued that England in the twelfth and thirteenth century saw a shift « from sacred script to pragmatic literacy » and that business was the foundation of this new literacy<sup>11</sup>. Clanchy's work developed two strands in particular which became a focus for future scholarship. One was a consideration of the circumstances which

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8. *Ibid.*, p. 564-566, 572. See below, p. 64-66.

9. M. CLANCHY, *From Memory to Written Record*, *op. cit.*

10. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 434.

promoted the formation of literate habits and thus pragmatic literacy in England<sup>12</sup>. The other was an examination of the idea of a « literate mentality ».

The first of Clanchy's two strands has since prompted work on the formation of literate habits elsewhere in medieval Europe and Asia, which in turn led to comparisons about the relative speed in the take up of pragmatic literacy. Clanchy's case study had been based on one political unit, England, in the period 1066-1307. Consequently he focused on circumstances unique to England, including wholesale conquest by the Normans in 1066, a highly centralised government, and a relatively small geographical area. Elsewhere, of course, radically different conditions prevailed, and scholars working on Eastern Europe and Asia pointed to developments in marked contrast to those noted by Clanchy for England. A sample of this work was brought together in a volume of essays edited by Richard Britnell in 1997, *Pragmatic Literacy, East and West, 1200-1330*<sup>13</sup>. As the editor, Britnell intended to produce a survey of Europe and Asia, describing the conditions and usage of pragmatic literacy (a project that he stated was partly inspired by the work on medieval literacy being conducted at the University of Münster)<sup>14</sup>.

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12. In the most recent edition of the book, Clanchy changed his use of the phrase « practical literacy » to « pragmatic literacy » (see for example the change in title of the tenth chapter). This decision was presumably based on the increasing recognition accorded to the latter term.

13. *Pragmatic Literacy, East and West, 1200-1330*, ed. R. H. Britnell, Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 1997. This was the first English-language publication to make reference to « pragmatic literacy » in its title.

14. See below, p. 11.

Britnell's own chapter on Latin Christendom argued that socio-economic conditions, landscape and style of governance had a bearing on the use of documents and spread of pragmatic literacy. So in the case of medieval England a small, largely rural lowland region saw royal government and law influence the growth of literacy. In this way it differed from the Italian model of mercantile literacy, fostered by trade and competition between the city states. Britnell also sought to measure European practices against systems of record keeping beyond Latin Christendom. He concluded that the rarity of surviving documents outside of Europe did not mean the exercise of power was any less dependent on writing. In part it was because paper records did not survive in warm climates, and in part because it was rational to destroy records of ephemeral significance. The problem of conserving archives also caused greater difficulties to the large and ancient bureaucracies in China and Japan, for example, than to the newer and smaller Latin Christendom. Britnell's collection of essays also included work on non-Christian communities within Europe. One of the contributors, Manfred Groten, highlighted the separate records of Jewish communities in Cologne, whose charters were written in Hebrew and translated into Latin before being sewn into the margins of books<sup>15</sup>.

The approach to pragmatic literacy Britnell adopted in this volume made a distinction between two different types of written text. One was the literary manuscript : « philosophy,

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15. M. GROTEN, « Civic Record Keeping in Cologne 1250-1330 », in *Pragmatic Literacy*, ed. R. H. Britnell, *op. cit.*, p. 81-88.

theology, law, poetry, romance, usually marketable, and kept in a library». By contrast, the other sort of written text contributed to some legal or administrative operation, and was produced for the use of a particular administrator or property owner<sup>16</sup>. For Britnell, the emphasis was on authority ; whilst he argued that pragmatic literacy could not engender authority (founded as it was upon a wider range of traditional beliefs and practices) he emphasised that it was a means by which authority could be protected or expanded to new limits. It also allowed an expansion of the memory available to those with power over people and property. Britnell's approach here differed from the one developed at the University of Münster, where those working on the pragmatic literacy project used the word 'pragmatics' to define a methodology, a way of thinking about all kinds of texts, rather than to define a particular genre (see below for further discussion)<sup>17</sup>.

The other strand of research that Michael Clanchy had pioneered was the study of « literate mentalities », a term he used to describe the profound shift in culture and in thought processes which the spread of literacy brought about. Here he was building on the work of anthropologists like Jack Goody, and in later editions on Jacques le Goff's *The Medieval Imagination*<sup>18</sup>. For Clanchy, medieval literate mentality had several facets. One was a slowly developing trust in documents, which manifested in changes in attitudes to law

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16. *Pragmatic Literacy*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

17. See below, p. 15, n. 37.

18. J. LE GOFF, *The Medieval Imagination*, Chicago-London, University of Chicago Press, 1988.



and legal proofs and created new definitions of forgery. It also sharpened the perception of a difference between reading and writing (the latter being regarded as a manual skill). Furthermore it led to a change in the articulation of thoughts and memories. It allowed for interaction between oral and literate forms in the idea of reading as an auditory activity, with texts read aloud (messages, proclamations, sermons, auditing of accounts). Finally, it incorporated the interaction between word and image (in wall paintings and manuscript illuminations for example)<sup>19</sup>.

This idea of a literate mentality was taken up by Brian Stock in his book, *The Implications of Literacy*, published in 1983<sup>20</sup>. Stock self-consciously wrote in the tradition of « historical anthropology » inspired by Jacques le Goff<sup>21</sup>. He sought to demonstrate that by the eleventh and twelfth centuries a new set of assumptions emerged about the relationship between language, texts and reality. Texts provided a new « technology of the mind », which meant that

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19. M. CLANCHY, *From Memory to Written Record, op. cit.*, p. 187-335. These ideas are endorsed in Bäuml's work on the stages of literacy : F. H. BÄUML, « Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy », *Speculum*, 55/2, 1980, p. 237-265.

20. B. STOCK, *The Implications of Literacy : Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983. See also W. J. ONG, *Orality and Literacy : The Technologizing of the Word*, London, Methuen, 1982.

21. One reviewer described Stock as employing the « ethnographical gaze » that Jacques Le Goff heralded : S. G. NICHOLS, « Review : The Implications of Literacy : Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries by Brian Stock », *Speculum*, 61/1, 1986, p. 208-213.

oral discourse increasingly functioned within a framework of legal and institutional textuality<sup>22</sup>. This affected social relations, as the codification of rules influenced patterns of behaviour, and prompted a change in the way people established personal identity. A central theme of his argument was that we should distinguish between literacy, orality, and textuality. The last of these, he argued, was more useful as a way to describe the relationship with texts which dominated in the Middle Ages, when interaction with texts was not always based on literacy, or even on the physical object of the text itself « on many occasions actual texts were not present, but people often thought or behaved as if they were »<sup>23</sup>. Stock famously coined the phrase ‘textual community’ to articulate this form of social organisation, arguing that literacy influenced group structures and that relationships between humans were affected by the degree to which they recognised written principles.

Stock used examples of communities of heretics to show how texts were used to justify deviating from customary ecclesiastical norms. He argued that what was essential to a textual community was not the text, but an individual who had mastered it, and then utilized it as the basis of reform<sup>24</sup>. Stock’s work on textual communities therefore had particular resonance for historians of religion, faith and heresy. This can be seen in the collection of essays edited by Anne Hudson and Peter Biller, *Heresy and Literacy, 1000-1530*, published in

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22. B. STOCK, *The Implications of Literacy*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

1994<sup>25</sup>. Chapters on the Lollards and other popular heretical groups, such as the Waldensians and Hussites, sought to demonstrate that literacy was not only an instrument of state and ecclesiastical control. Heretical ideas disseminated through preaching could also create cohesive textual communities and bolster their resistance of overreaching « official » culture.

In summary, the scholarship published from the 1970s–1990s examined the socio-economic background of pragmatic literacy and the cognitive changes it appeared to have engendered. The work of scholars such as Michael Clanchy provided inspiration for the University of Münster’s « pragmatic literacy » project, as well as the « Utrecht studies in Medieval Literacy » series and for recent work on medieval communication, which encompasses the fields of orality, non-verbal communication and gesture.

*1999-2009 : University of Münster « Pragmatic Literacy »  
Project and the « Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy »*

In 1996, Marco Mostert’s project at the University of Utrecht launched the series « Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy »<sup>26</sup>. The first of the volumes to be published in the series was Mostert’s *New Approaches to Medieval*

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25. *Heresy and Literacy, 1000-1530*, ed. P. Biller and A. Hudson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

26. For a list of volumes, see :

<http://www2.hum.uu.nl/Solis/ogc/medievalliteracy/USML-overview.htm>.

*Communication*<sup>27</sup>. The volume included an introduction to the project by Michael Clanchy, who highlighted the recent interest in « literalization » (the English word coined to describe « the process of becoming literate »)<sup>28</sup>. According to Clanchy, this process should be viewed in the wider context of medieval communication; forms of non-verbal communication, including « smells, colours, gestures, clothes, the visual arts and music » exemplified in the liturgy of the medieval church<sup>29</sup>. He also emphasised the continued priority of orality in medieval communication. He stressed that for medieval readers, like their classical predecessors, reading was a « speech act », a process of recovering a writer's thoughts. This was why emphasis was placed on reading aloud in medieval societies<sup>30</sup>. Marco Mostert developed this theme in his chapter by highlighting possible new approaches to the study of medieval communication, as they were emerging at the time he was writing, in 1999. One was to focus on the visual and examine the interaction between visual arts and other media, especially texts. Another was to examine the relationship between oral and written forms, rather than to focus exclusively on « oral formulaic theory » which Mostert

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27. *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, ed. M. Mostert, Turnhout, Brepols, 1999 (Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy, 1).

28. *Ibid.*, p. 3. Clanchy also makes the point here that English still lacks many words to describe how communication works. Since terms in English are not as flexible as they are in German, English has no one word to describe « the process of literacy/becoming literate » (p. 5).

29. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

called « the hunt for oral formulas in medieval writing »<sup>31</sup>. A further suggestion was to examine public rituals (studied by Gerd Althoff and others) which showed that consultation, demonstration and stage setting of emotions were more important than writing in medieval politics<sup>32</sup>. Two final approaches Mostert referred to were the use of philology to study copies of written texts, and to study the organisation of texts, including subdivisions and layouts. He argued that apparently minor changes in punctuation or word spacing might suggest important psychological changes over the centuries<sup>33</sup>. Mostert praised the utility of the term « pragmatic literacy », which he linked to the work being done at the University of Münster. However he did raise a problem with the term, arguing that once the demands for written texts by literate, mainly clerical elites are also studied under the heading « pragmatic literacy », the boundaries with what he termed « mandarin literacy » became fluid<sup>34</sup>. Recent Anglophone scholarship on pragmatic literacy has certainly demonstrated an awareness of some of the approaches suggested by Mostert (discussed further below).

The work of the University of Münster's special research unit 231 « Representatives, Fields, and Forms of Pragmatic Written Record » had begun in 1986 and continued until 1999.

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31. *Ibid.*, p. 29, 31. See also M. CAMILLE, « Seeing and Reading : Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy », *Art History*, 8, 1985, p. 26-49.

32. *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, *op. cit.*, p. 35 and n. 119 for reference to Althoff.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

However, it was the publication in 2006 of an edited collection of articles based on the project, entitled *Transforming the Medieval World : Uses of Pragmatic Literacy in the Middle Ages* (published in the « Utrecht Studies in Medieval literacy » series) which really raised awareness of the project among an Anglophone audience<sup>35</sup>. Some of the methodologies they employed have now gained more widespread recognition in Anglophone scholarship. For instance, the emphasis they placed on reception theory is now becoming a commonplace, with much greater awareness of the need to examine the variations of texts as they were actually read and copied in the Middle Ages. This project also demonstrated how the school of « New Philology » was particularly relevant to medievalists, emphasising the variability of medieval written texts as *the* central characteristic of the manuscript culture of the period. Interestingly, the authors advocated the use of the CD-ROM as the medium of publication to better illustrate changes to texts, and they presented their research in this format alongside a printed edition of scholarly articles<sup>36</sup>. An important point made by those working on the Münster project was that « pragmatic

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35. *Transforming the Medieval World : Uses of Pragmatic Literacy in the Middle Ages*, ed. F. Arlinghaus *et alii*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2006 (Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy, 6).

36. It would be fair to say that Anglophone scholars have been slow to adopt such an approach. However, there has been a recent trend towards CD-ROM editions of important documents such as Domesday Book, the Bayeux Tapestry and the Rolls of Parliament. More recently, the creation of on-line databases has been funded by the British research councils. See below, p. 17, n. 40.

literacy » did not restrict them to a certain set of texts (in this they differed from Richard Britnell's genre-specific interpretation of pragmatic literacy). They stated that they sought to examine texts from the perspective of « pragmatics », thus using « pragmatics » as a methodology to better understand the use of texts in the Middle Ages<sup>37</sup>.

Finally, it is important to note the scholarship produced by the « Nordic Medieval Literacy » programme at the University of Stockholm in the 1990s. The programme sought to reverse what was perceived as a tailing off of work on literacy in Sweden (with the exception of the work on literacy in medieval monasteries). Inger Larsson's book, *Pragmatic Literacy and the Medieval Use of the Vernacular : The Swedish Example*, followed the line that Clanchy took for England, arguing that the Swedish Crown, the expanding bureaucracy and the legal system were the main driving forces behind the development of lay literacy for practical purposes<sup>38</sup>. She also suggested that these developments created « centres of literacy » from which literate ways of thinking and acting spread geographically and socially. This idea is echoed in some of the recent scholarship concerning the British Isles.

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37. Christel Meier states that « Another major complex which extended over several projects involved examining how major texts intended to impart large amounts of knowledge were transmitted. Such texts include encyclopaedias, handbooks and household books and, especially, historiographical works. First steps were taken to write histories of a particular such genre from the perspective of pragmatics », *Transforming the Medieval World*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

38. I. LARSSON, *Pragmatic Literacy and the Medieval Use of the Vernacular : The Swedish Example*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2009 (Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy, 16).

*Anglophone Scholarship : New Directions in the study of  
Political Consciousness and Pragmatic Literacy*

The influence of research into pragmatic literacy has inspired innovative approaches in a range of fields ; not least that of medieval « popular » politics and experiences of royal governance. Old assumptions about the centrality of the printing press to the cultivation of any kind of widespread political culture have long been discarded, and in their wake, scholars have begun to think more carefully about the role of the written word and of texts in the life of the medieval political community. Research into an array of innovative themes, including the performance of petitioning, the culture of complaint, « vernacularity » in politics and the evocation of the imaginary public has helped to craft a more nuanced picture of the evolution of medieval interaction with royal government. Much of this research has been built on the theoretical foundations of pragmatic literacy and allied concepts of medieval communication.

One area that has attracted renewed attention in recent years has been the medieval petitioning process, allowing as it does for insight into levels of political awareness and experiences of royal governance. Here, scholars have been sensitive to the lessons of research into pragmatic literacy, considering the written texts of the petitions themselves as part of a process of supplication with important physical and oral dimensions. Recent work by Mark Ormrod, Gwilym Dodd, Anthony Musson and others to catalogue the contents of the National Archives « Ancient Petitions » series in digital form has allowed the kind of sustained comparative analysis



that was previously so difficult<sup>39</sup>. Their work also highlights the trend to move towards large digital archives of material. This has in part been driven by the « access » agenda promoted by the British research councils, but it is also motivated by the same concerns that were expressed by those who worked on the pragmatic literacy project at Münster University ; that the printed book format imposes restrictions that do not always reflect the medieval experience of interaction with documents. In Anglophone scholarship, this attention to the implications of digitisation and a concomitant focus on the composition of modern archives has been dubbed the « archival turn », and has generated a considerable body of scholarship in itself<sup>40</sup>.

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39. G. DODD, *Justice and Grace : Private Petitioning and the English Parliament in the Late Middle Ages*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007 ; *Medieval Petitions : Grace and Grievance*, ed. W. M. Ormrod, G. Dodd, and A. Musson Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2009. These books represent the culmination of a major research project funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2003-2007. This work demonstrates the utility of the new Ancient Petitions catalogue, and its relevance to the field of pragmatic literacy. Researchers on this project catalogued the contents of The National Archives (TNA) « Ancient Petitions » series (over 17,000 documents in total). The results were then made available in a searchable format through the TNA on-line catalogue :

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/catalogue/search.asp>.

40. For an example of this kind of scholarship, see G. DODD, « Parliamentary Petitions ? The Origins and Provenance of the "Ancient Petitions" SC8 in the National Archives », in *Medieval Petitions, op. cit.*, p. 12-46. The methodology is set out in F. X. BLOUIN and W. G. ROSENBERG, *Processing the Past : Contesting Authority in History and the Archives*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

Work on medieval petitions has highlighted the need to understand such documents in the context of longstanding notions of royal grace, a distinct form of power legitimated by particular venues, rituals and visual media<sup>41</sup>. To take one example, petitions for royal pardon sometimes functioned within a wider context of verbal pleading and supplication<sup>42</sup>. Individuals close to the king might be sought to act as intermediaries, using particular forms of words and gestures in their appeal to the monarch. Contemporary written descriptions of these scenes of intercession often drew on scriptural and classical allusions in their evocation of such events, and knowledge of such themes might be disseminated via public occasions such as royal pageants. In one such pageant, described in Richard of Maidstone's *Concordia*, a public display of mercy and pardon was acted out to herald Richard II's reconciliation with the city of London, in August 1392. As part of the procession, the royal entourage passed through Southwark, where the king stopped to pardon a criminal. The king and queen were then presented with gold tablets representing the crucifixion, to promote the divine quality of mercy. At Westminster, the queen fulfilled an earlier promise to intercede with the king on behalf of the citizens of London and the king pardoned them, restoring their keys and ancient privileges, to which the crowd, in response, cried « Long live the king »<sup>43</sup>. It is clear that the acting out of such

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41. J. WATTS, *The Making of Politics: Europe, 1300-1500*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 32.

42. H. LACEY, *The Royal Pardon: Access to Mercy in Fourteenth-Century England*, Woodbridge, Boydell, 2009, p. 38-58.

43. H. LACEY, *The Royal Pardon, op. cit.*, p. 73.

rituals and the written accounts that described them were mutually reinforcing. As Paul Strohm eloquently puts it, these texts operated « in the ill-defined zone between imagination and social practice, that zone in which texts stand the best chance of changing the way people actually behave »<sup>44</sup>.

Strohm's focus on the prominent role of medieval queens as intercessors for pardon led him to conclude that descriptions of their actions shed light on the « invention of gendered behaviour », which was itself a product of the interaction between texts and performance :

« The invention of gendered behaviour, out of available models and for particular purposes, is manifestly the property of no single kind of text, but crosses the divisions between social gestures and actions and written accounts, and between one kind of account and another »<sup>45</sup>.

Thus, attitudes towards the text of the pardon were informed by a wider nexus of verbal and physical behaviour. Concepts of pragmatic literacy have led scholars to take these « performative » aspects of asking pardon more seriously ; those people who received letters of pardon did not need to be able to read every word of the text in order to be aware of the rituals and non-verbal gestures of mercy, and to be sensitive to the vital role that the letter might play in their lives. Recipients of pardon also knew that the physical object of the letter of pardon had to be « proved » in court before witnesses drawn from the local community in order to be

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44. P. STROHM, *Hochon's Arrow : The Social Imagination of Fourteenth Century Texts*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 99.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

validated<sup>46</sup>. Thus for them, pragmatic literacy encompassed familiarity with written documents and also familiarity with the rituals that went with them.

Contemporary references to letters of pardon and royal charters also reinforced the sense that they possessed a particular talismanic quality, representing an unmediated connection with the royal mercy dispensed by the monarch himself<sup>47</sup>. It is clear from this that the late medieval preoccupation with the iconography of political and legal documents needs further investigation in the context of pragmatic literacy. The practice of issuing many royal documents, such as letters patent, with a great seal attached, allowed for the powerful imagery of the seal to be widely disseminated. It was also possible to add illumination to the initial letter of such documents, since the scribal practice in the royal chancery was to allow space around the initial letter and the risers in the first line of text. This practice again alludes to their significance as objects as well as texts, and the value attached to them by recipients. One way to gain an insight into the way these documents were represented by contemporaries is to examine references made to them in a genre of texts referred to by historians as medieval « outlaw ballads » (texts such as *Adam Bell* and *Robin Hood*)<sup>48</sup>. These

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46. H. LACEY, *The Royal Pardon*, *op. cit.*, p. 25. When the pardon was « proved » in court it was declared that any appellant wishing to bring a suit against the recipient of pardon should come forward. Only after this final check had been performed would « final peace » be proclaimed.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 55, 132-136.

48. Recent editions of these texts have been published by TEAMS Middle English Texts Serie :

ballads portray the use of documents through the lens of a distinct literary genre, of course, a genre defined by its own particular tropes and devices. However, it is interesting nonetheless that these ballads sought to represent a society in which attitudes to texts were highly complex : knowledge and use of writing could be liberating and characters in these stories regularly sought out petitions, writs and royal charters. However, government documents were also often represented as objects of suspicion, employing unfamiliar phrases beyond the comprehension of the protagonists, to trap the unwitting outlaw in the eyes of the law. Some of the scenes in particular ballads even played upon the levels of literacy expected of royal officials. In one ballad, *Adam Bell*, the outlaws pretend to be royal messengers and dupe the porter at the gates of a town with a forged letter purporting to be from king, because the porter is unable to read :

« Than spake Clymme of the Cloughe :  
 “With a wyle we wyll us in brynge ;  
 Let us say we be messengers,  
 Streight comen from oure kyng”.  
 Adam sayd, “I have a lettre wryten wele,  
 Now let us wysely werke ;  
 We wyll say we have the kynges seale,  
 I holde the porter no clerke”. »

(Adam Bell, ll. 213-220)<sup>49</sup>

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<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/tmsmenu.htm#menu>.

49. *Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough, and William of Cloudesley*, ed. S. Knight and T. H. Ohlgren, Kalamazoo, 1997 (TEAMS), online : <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/adam.htm>.

H. LACEY, *The Royal Pardon, op. cit.*, p. 40-43.

Instead of reading the document brandished by the outlaws, the porter simply recognises the royal seal and allows them to enter the gates of the town :

« Lo ! here we have the kynges seale ;  
 What, lordane, arte thou wode ?  
 The porter had wende it had been so,  
 And lyghtly dyd of hys hode.  
 “Welcome be my lordes seale, sayd he,  
 For that shall ye come in”.  
 He opened the gate ryght shortly,  
 An evyl openynge for hym ! »

(Adam Bell, ll. 241-8)

The ballads also represent the performance which went alongside certain government documents. In the Adam Bell ballad, the outlaws travel to the king’s court, gain an audience with the king himself, and then go down on bended knee, performing a ritual of supplication, with a document, the royal pardon, at its centre. Here, the prominence given to the personal role of the king might not have been indicative of the process experienced by the majority of supplicants, who might never themselves meet the king in person<sup>50</sup>. Thus the ballads operate in the « zone » described by Strohm, « between imagination and social practice ». They also emphasise the reciprocity of such acts of mercy : the king grants pardon, or favour, and the outlaw agrees to live quietly

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50. There were rare instances in which a petitioner was able to gain direct access to the monarch to put their case forward in person. For examples, see *ibid.*, p. 66.

and give loyal service<sup>51</sup>. Broadly speaking, these stories represent their protagonists engaging almost routinely with royal documents. Historians such as Mark Ormrod suggest that this picture transfers across to lived experience, with peasant communities demonstrating a broad basic knowledge of letters, writs, charters, petitions, seals and heraldic devices which provided the main channel for communication between royal government and the majority of the king's subjects<sup>52</sup>. It is important to remember, of course, that this relationship with royal documents was an ambiguous one. Medieval outlaws fled to the greenwood to evade their own legal record but, in the ballads at least, they recognised the need to secure a document of pardon in order to be rehabilitated and re-enter society. Similarly, historians have long recognised that tenants might act collectively to seek out transcripts of legal cases and purchase their own copies of important documents, such as excerpts from Domesday Book, which proved their rights and customs to landholdings<sup>53</sup>. But the proliferation of

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51. Metaphorical references to such charters appeared in other contexts. See, for example, the « charters of Christ » theme, in which the New Covenant made by Christ at the Last Supper is etched as a sealed document onto his own crucified body : see C. W. BYNUM, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 1200-1336*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995 ; J. A. KEEN, *The Charters of Christ and Piers Plowman : Documenting Salvation*, New York, Peter Lang, 2002.

52. W. M. ORMROD, « Robin Hood and Public Record : The Authority of Writing in the Medieval Outlaw Tradition », in *Medieval Cultural Studies : Essays in Honour of Stephen Knight*, ed. H. Fulton, D. Matthews and R. Evans, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2006, p. 57-74.

53. C. DYER, « The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381 », in *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston,

written records was also opposed by the same groups of people, most famously in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, when such records threatened them with the overreaching power of the state<sup>54</sup>.

Research into other political and legal processes throughout medieval Europe reveals a similar pattern of interaction with texts and the immediacy of the link between written forms and spoken and physical behaviours (reminiscent of Stock's « textual communities »). In a recent collection of essays edited by Marco Mostert and Paul Barnwell, which draws together work on an array of different European contexts, it is clear that written documents were intimately associated with performance, and that medieval pragmatic literacy encompassed this kind of understanding<sup>55</sup>. The actions of witnesses, for example, were crucial to the authentication of written documents. Bernhard Zeller illustrates this with reference to the process in Alemannic law which provided for the authentication of donation charters. If the authenticity of such a document was challenged, the

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Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 9-42 ; R. B. GOHEEN, « Peasant Politics? Village Communities and the Crown in Fifteenth-Century England », *American Historical Review*, 96, 1991, p. 42-62 ; I. M. W. HARVEY, « Was There Popular Politics in Fifteenth-Century England? », in *The McFarlane Legacy: Studies in Late Medieval Politics and Society*, ed. R. H. Britnell and A. J. Pollard, Stroud, A. Sutton, 1995, p. 155-174.

54. S. JUSTICE, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994 ; H. LACEY, *The Royal Pardon*, *op. cit.*, p. 127-159.

55. *Medieval Legal Process: Physical, Spoken and Written Performance in the Middle Ages*, ed. M. Mostert and P. S. Barnwell, Turnhout, Brepols, 2012 (Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy, 22).



witnesses recorded in the charter were summoned and asked to testify that they had been present when the charter was originally constituted, that they had « put their hands on the parchment » and finally that they had « seen with their own eyes and heard with their own ears » that the charter was a true record of the donation<sup>56</sup>. Similarly, much recent work on medieval memory has demonstrated the extent to which the credibility of witness testimony hinged on recollection through associated emotion or behaviour. Jeremy Goldberg's work on the consistory courts of the Archbishop of York, for example, demonstrates that women were credited as being expert witnesses in « proof of age » cases, because of the memory linked to the experience of childbirth<sup>57</sup>. These methods of authentication were not divorced from written forms. Witnesses knew that they operated within the textual apparatus of the written records produced by the courts, but they drew on ways to structure their memory that were less reliant on textual forms<sup>58</sup>.

It is also clear that a central component of pragmatic literacy in this period was that of collective activity. Groups of peasants might employ a scribe to write up a petition on their

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56. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

57. P. J. P. GOLDBERG, « Gender and Matrimonial Litigation in the Church Courts of Later Medieval England », *Gender and History*, 19/1, 2007, p. 43-59, p. 49-50.

58. M. CARRUTHERS, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, 2nd ed., 2008 ; B. KANE, « Social Representations of Memory and Gender in Later Medieval England », *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, Special Issue 46/4, 2012, p. 553.

behalf, but they would have enough of a grasp of textual forms to be able to communicate their wishes effectively<sup>59</sup>. It is also clear that those who drafted petitions on behalf of such people employed particular narrative strategies to express commonalty, using formulations such as « murmur, clamour and noise » to evoke communal sentiment. Mark Ormrod has demonstrated that this kind of language not only invoked oral forms, but it also demonstrated the political importance of articulating the commonality of complaint<sup>60</sup>. Similarly, Wendy Scase's work argues for the centrality of a complaint culture in this period, which crossed a range of literary genres and influenced the development of institutions such as parliament and the common law<sup>61</sup>. Part of Scase's argument is that these developments shaped a culture of complaint that went beyond the confines of judicial processes. Thus for contemporaries the articulation of complaint involved a written language that mirrored oral

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59. M. B. PARKES, *Their Hands Before our Eyes : A Closer Look at Scribes*, the Lyell lectures delivered in the University of Oxford, 1999, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008 ; M. MULHOLLAND, « Trials in Manorial Courts in Late Medieval England », in *Judicial Tribunals in England and Europe, 1200-1700*, vol. 1, *The Trial in History*, ed. M. Mulholland and B. Pullan, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 81-101 ; M. TOMPKINS, « "Let's Kill all the Lawyers" : Did Fifteenth-Century Peasants Employ Lawyers when they Conveyed Customary Land ? », in *Identity and Insurgency in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. L. Clark, Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2006, p. 73-88.

60. W. M. ORMROD, « Murmur, Clamour and Noise : Voicing Complaint and Remedy in Petitions to the English Crown, c. 1300-c. 1460 », in *Medieval Petitions*, op. cit., p. 135-155.

61. W. SCASE, *Literature and Complaint in England, 1272-1553*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

expressions of communal discontent. Some level of literacy was necessary to interact with these documents, but the concepts they evoked drew on a much more developed and longstanding stock of oral expressions.

Gwilym Dodd's work on one particular petition (« Paunfield's petition », c. 1414) demonstrates this kind of community involvement in the production of documents, and also highlights the more fluid interaction between written and oral forms of expression<sup>62</sup>. In this case the tenants of the manor of Chesterton in Cambridgeshire sought to petition the crown as part of their ongoing dispute with the Augustinian priory of Barnwell, who claimed to be their landlords. In the archives, this particular petition is, unusually, attached to the text of a lengthy speech written in English. This speech is seemingly designed as the script for an appeal to parliament. The phrasing of the speech suggests that one of the tenants, a man called Thomas Paunfield, wrote it himself, or at least dictated it. It demonstrates a remarkable knowledge of the law, of parliamentary process, and of political vocabulary. However, as Dodd argues, the speech, remarkable as it was, still needed the French petition alongside it to validate it in the eyes of the crown. An examination of the drafting and use of this one petition therefore allows us to think about the « performance » of this petition in parliament, with the English script hinting at a difference between the oral presentation and the legal formulation of the petition

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62. G. DODD, « Thomas Paunfield, the 'heye Court of rightwisnesse' and the Language of Petitioning in the Fifteenth Century », in *Medieval Petitions*, *op. cit.*, p. 222-241.

itself, in French. It also raises questions about the relationship between the use of French and English vernacular in this period, an area which has been explored in more detail by Elisabeth Salter, Helen Wicker and others in a recent volume of the « Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy » series<sup>63</sup>.

This volume, *Vernacularity in England and Wales c. 1300-1550*, posits the idea of using ‘vernacularity’ as a word to evoke a wider context of vernacular use. The political importance of expressing commonality, discussed above, increasingly necessitated the use of vernacular languages, in a period where vernacular usage was often associated with « popular » politics<sup>64</sup>. The link between pragmatic literacy and the use of different languages (particularly the vernacular languages) in the British Isles is evident in this collection of essays. Along with other recent studies into multilingualism and translation, this body of work has shown how pragmatic literacy evolved from the « complex cultural processes » which

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63. *Vernacularity in England and Wales c. 1300-1550*, ed. E. Salter and H. Wicker, Turnhout, Brepols, 2011 (Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy, 17).

64. There has also been a recent focus on the writers and scribes who used the vernacular. Linne Mooney, Professor of Medieval English Palaeography at the University of York, has led a research project on medieval English scribes. Her project led to the creation of an on-line catalogue of « Late Medieval English Scribes » : <http://www.medievalscribes.com/>. The scholarship that developed from this database demonstrated how these scribes, who worked on the literary output of major figures such as Chaucer and Gower, also worked on practical documents ; legal and administrative records commissioned by those who could afford them.

linked orality and literacy<sup>65</sup>. The questions raised by this work are important for our understanding of pragmatic literacy more generally : how was vernacularity conceptualised as a « visual and spatial medium », and what kinds of ‘imaginative spaces’ did it create and exist within ?<sup>66</sup> Again this work draws on the lessons of reception theory to examine how individuals encountered the written word, particularly the presentation and positioning of individual texts. So, for example, Jayne Rimmer’s study of the language used in medieval architectural documents illustrates developments in vernacular language at the regional level by highlighting the interaction between language and the archaeology of buildings<sup>67</sup>. In a similar vein, Andrew Butcher advocates the use of the term « vernacular behaviour » to describe the way in which use of the vernacular shaped mentality and behaviour. Use of the vernacular, he says, allowed for negotiation of new ideas and identities<sup>68</sup>. An example of this kind of negotiation can be seen in the use of the vernacular to articulate the political consciousness of particular social groups. Indeed, Helen Wicker refers to the use of phrases

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65. J. WOGAN-BROWNE *et alii* (ed.), *Language and Culture in Medieval Britain : The French of England c. 1100–c. 1500*, Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2009 ; J. WOGAN-BROWNE *et alii* (ed.), *The Idea of the Vernacular : An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory*, Exeter, Exeter University Press, 1999.

66. *Vernacularity in England and Wales*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

67. J. RIMMER, « The Language of Property : Vernacular in the Context of Late Medieval Urban Identities », in *Vernacularity in England and Wales*, *op. cit.*, p. 269-293.

68. A. BUTCHER, « Textual Production and Vernacular Behaviour : Locating a Fifteenth-Century Administrative Book », in *Vernacularity in England and Wales*, *op. cit.*, p. 295-323.

such as « mother tongue » and « common people's language », which linked the use of the vernacular to particular places and social groups<sup>69</sup>. Thus Wicker suggests that the increased policing of speech in the fifteenth century overlapped with politics surrounding vernacular development in this period. She argues that indictments for treasonous remarks often represent a dialogue between the alleged speaker, the individual who reported them, and the legal officials who drafted the record. The use of English in the records highlights the tension between the suspicion of popular voices and awareness of their political influence<sup>70</sup>.

This scholarship also offers new insight into questions surrounding the extent to which contemporaries conceived of a public discursive space in this period. John Watts, in particular, has asked whether people thought of « public opinion », and whether that included « popular opinion »<sup>71</sup>.

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69. *Vernacularity in England and Wales, op. cit.*, p. 4. See also Wicker's article in the same volume : H. WICKER, « The Politics of Vernacular Speech : Cases of Treasonable Language, c. 1440-1453 », in *Vernacularity in England and Wales, op. cit.*, p. 171-197.

70. Gwilym Dodd's article in the same volume examines the spread of English in the records of central government in the early fifteenth century. He argues against the idea that the English government of the early fifteenth century adopted a conscious policy of promoting English vernacular. Dodd concludes by suggesting that in order to understand vernacular development we need to pay more attention to matters such as illiteracy, orality, literate mentalities, non-verbal means of communication, and its social and political implications. G. DODD, « The Spread of English in the Records of Central Government, 1400-1430 », in *Vernacularity in England and Wales, op. cit.*, p. 225-266.

71. J. WATTS, « The Pressure of the Public on Later Medieval Politics », in *Political Culture in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. C. Carpenter and L. Clark,

Watts argues that research into such questions must utilise developments in the field of pragmatic literacy. He argues that the social and political power of textuality is not always sufficiently acknowledged, particularly in a period when increasing numbers of people were interacting with forms of royal governance, politics and public life. His analysis of the manifestoes of the rebels who participated in Cade's rebellion of 1450 reiterates the importance of the language of commonalty, or here « *commune profit* », notions which were championed by the rebels who spoke for « all the comyns of Ingland ». Watts asks whether, in the use of such phrases, the rebels were laying claim to the authority of the *communitas*, evoked in iconic documents of previous centuries such as Magna Carta and the Provisions of Oxford and Westminster<sup>72</sup>. He also emphasises « the sense of a common discursive space ; an implicitly national forum to be addressed, but also a treasury – or perhaps an emporium – of acceptable language. To speak, or to write, to, or for, or even in, this public was to make a political assertion comparable to that implied in claiming membership of the community<sup>73</sup>.

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Woodbridge, XXX, 2004, p. 159-180, p. 164 ; see also D. GRUMMITT, « Deconstructing Cade's Rebellion : Discourse and Politics in the Mid-Fifteenth Century », in *Identity and Insurgency in the Late Middle Ages*, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 107-122 ; J. WATTS, « Public or Plebs : The Changing Meaning of « the Commons », 1381-1549 », in *Power and Identity in the Middle Ages : Essays in Memory of Rees Davies*, ed. H. Pryce and J. L. Watts, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 242-260.

72. J. WATTS, « The Pressure of the Public », *op. cit.*, p. 160.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 161 ; S. Justice argued that those who took part in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 « aimed not to destroy the documentary culture of feudal tenure and royal government, but to re-create it ». He showed that the

Watts suggests that when, in 1485, king Richard III wrote to the mayor and aldermen of the city of York warning them of seditious persons sowing discord through billes, messages and speech, he was evoking a distinct discursive community<sup>74</sup>. Thus, for Watts, this discursive community should be studied in the same way that historians study the « textual communities » of heretical groups such as the Lollards. This argument also contains within it a challenge to the perception that the medieval public was synonymous with the middle class. Instead, this kind of textual culture transcends particular social groups. Helen Wicker, too, points to an overlap in the language used to criticise those in positions of authority, which appears in supposedly « elite » literary texts, and in the treasonous remarks made in alehouses. She asks whether this is a sign of intertextuality, or whether stronger and more widespread oral traditions subsequently appear in texts<sup>75</sup>.

One way to further elucidate these kinds of textual communities and networks is to utilise the work done in the field of local studies. Gillian Draper, for example, has demonstrated the distinctiveness of local identity in the Romney Marshes, south east England, through the varying use of language in speech and writing<sup>76</sup>. She studied a group

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rebels chose to articulate their own complaints in idioms that were fundamentally different from conventions of royal government : S. JUSTICE, *Writing and Rebellion*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

74. J. WATTS, « The Pressure of the Public », *op. cit.*, p. 164.

75. H. WICKER, « The Politics of Vernacular Speech », *op. cit.*, p. 192.

76. G. M. DRAPER, « Writing English, French and Latin in the Fifteenth Century : A Regional Perspective », in *Conflicts, Consequences and the Crown in*



of tenants in this area who leased property from All Souls College, University of Oxford and demonstrated that these tenants were part of a wider network of a literate community. Draper's research shows that in the second half of the fifteenth century, fifty percent or more of All Souls lessors on Romney Marsh wrote their own bills of expenses. She exemplifies this by analysing the patterns of English usage in these documents, as well as their layout, the use of first and third person references, dating, style and spelling and a detailed comparison of handwriting. From this evidence, it is clear that lessors knew the documentary format for a bill, and also produced some accounts. Their cross channel trade also connected them to another network of literacy in the languages of French and Flemish and they encountered in the Latin words of the liturgy and the stained glass of the parish church. Thus, Draper's work makes clear that there can be no simple explanation of the movement from oral to literate forms in the later Middle Ages.

Recent Anglophone scholarship, then, has tended to focus on the relationship between orality and textuality, emphasising the need for synthesis rather than clear contrasts. There has also been a drive to examine pragmatic literacy in the context of performance, and to emphasise the symbolic role of the physical document within a wider context of ritual performance, emotion and gesture. Several scholars have focused in particular on the articulation of « public voices »,

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*the Later Middle Ages*, ed. L. Clark, Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2007, p. 213-235.

and the ability of a wide cross section of the population to engage with common political ideas. They have also sought to elucidate textual networks, communities and discursive spaces which reveal the overlapping identities of individuals who were commonly members of more than one textual network. In these ways, research into pragmatic literacy continues to have an enduring legacy.