CHAPTER 28

LEARNING TO LIVE

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First, the question of aesthetics and reader fatigue. At the conclusion of his study of medieval courtesy books, Jonathan Nicholls sounds exhausted:

> An examination of a typical courtesy book ... does not leave the reader with an immediate sense of its cultural worth or importance. The precepts seem crude and basic, the style, at best a hackneyed pastiche of the prevailing literary fashion, is at worst the heavy and unpalatable dough of pedagogy.[1]

Nicholls's candour is refreshing. It allows us to acknowledge that medieval books of nurture, courtesy, conduct, and advice are often intractable; instead of delighting us, or bringing us to the point of the sublime, as we conventionally expect of literary texts, they make us feel uncomfortable, and are almost impossible to read from beginning to end. Anyone spending much time with these texts starts to feel grateful to the glossing conventions of nineteenth-century editors, whose marginal notes on many such works help us navigate our way through them. We should probably acknowledge, too, that our attention is most often engaged when the manners or precepts being expressed are curiously unfamiliar, when these works seem to promise a neat codification of the daily alterity of the Middle Ages. And yet the content of many of these books—especially those concerned with table manners and social decorum—is not that alien to modern principles of social governance. We similarly train our children not to put food they have touched back in the common dish, not to speak with their mouths full, and not to wipe their noses on the tablecloth. The play of similarity and difference between ourselves and the medieval past is thrown into sharper relief when we compare the content and the use of these texts in the medieval period and our own. Aspiring courtiers might read one such text and be glad to hold a precious collection of time-honoured advice in their hands as the key to social success; aspiring students and scholars feel

[1] Jonathan Nicholls, *The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), 140.

obliged to read as many as they can, while also trying to read behind and around these texts, for glimpses into the lived reality of the medieval period implied by its various principles and rules for living. Medieval conduct literature forces the question: what do *we* do with such texts?

Writing in 1985, Nicholls resolves the question of perspective by adopting the familiar approach of putting these texts where scholars used to agree that historical background belonged: *behind* works of literature. His study is divided into two parts: first, a rich scholarly description of medieval secular and religious texts of courtesy and nurture, in Latin, French, and English; and second, a study of the four poems of the *Gawain*-manuscript and their relation to that tradition. He also includes a number of texts and translations of rare works. For Nicholls, conduct texts are to be read in the service of better understanding medieval literature. He knows these texts intimately, and is able to recognize features of the courtesy tradition in the four poems. His division into background and foreground does have the effect, though, of reducing our interest in works of conduct and nurture as textual artefacts, and of helping to maintain a hierarchical distinction between the literary and the non-literary that was not such a strong feature of the medieval textual landscape.

A more recent collaborative foray into this material articulates a very different approach, as we might expect in a different critical era. Kathleen Ashley and Robert L. A. Clarke introduce their edited collection of essays, *Medieval Conduct*, with a discussion of the relationship between 'documents or texts and lived practice or performance'.[2] Instead of using conduct and courtesy texts to illuminate 'literature', their emphasis is divided equally between 'texts, theories, and practices'. Ashley and Clarke also consider the reception history of the texts, the way they have been subordinated to literary works as if 'contaminated' by their association with material and social history; their damaging association with popular culture (especially in the case of books addressed to women); the sometimes artificial distinction between texts addressed to men and women; and the recent recuperation of these texts as valuable cultural artefacts, no longer to be rigorously set apart from literary texts. Emphasizing the circulation of discourse between late medieval texts, many of the essays in Ashley's and Clarke's collection effectively reverse Nicholls's priorities, encouraging the reading of both 'literary' and other kinds of texts such as Lollard trial records and confraternity documents for their capacity to serve as forms of conduct literature, as they tease out the 'behavioral ideologies' at work in different sorts of texts.

Recent theories of ritual practice and social behaviour also help us examine the representation of nurture and conduct in the medieval period and the reality of medieval behaviour, thought, and feeling about the proper conduct of the self,

[2] Kathleen Ashley and Robert L. A. Clarke (eds.), *Medieval Conduct* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2001), p. ix.

whether that self is conceived primarily in spiritual, social, or ethical terms. Key texts here are Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* and *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.[3] None of these writers is specially concerned with medieval English life, but we can fruitfully draw on their various methods of interpreting the social world: the customs, practices, and rituals of daily life.

My focus is, however, principally textual. Unlike the sociologists, I am interested in the textual effects of these works, across a range of forms: narrative, didactic, exemplary, prescriptive, and satiric. These texts are always layered, and so, too, should be our critical paradigms. With these possibilities in mind, I will explore several different approaches to this material. This chapter offers no taxonomy of conduct literature, no fine discriminations between its genres, no historical account of its development; my focus throughout is on the questions raised by these texts, and I will move freely amongst different genres and types.

Medieval conduct books: writers and readers

> Qwo so wylle of curtasy lere,
> In this boke he may hit here!
> Yf thow be gentylmon, yomon, or knaue,
> The nedis nurture for to haue.[4]

The production of conduct books increases rapidly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, suggesting the increasing instability of class boundaries and a concern at various levels either to maintain or acquire the manners and customs of 'courtesy'. According to conservative early medieval ideology, such manners were the natural preserve of the aristocracy alone. By contrast, these opening lines from the *Boke of Curtasye*, dated around 1460, confidently address men of several classes, suggesting that all are in need of training, whether to acquit themselves honourably at court, to further a career of service in a noble household, or even to 'pass', as we might say, as a member of a higher class. The *Boke* proceeds with a detailed set of instructions as to how to be a gracious guest when you visit a lord's household, and how to eat

[3] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (1930), trans. Edmund Jephcott, rev. edn. ed. Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom, and Stephen Mennell (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

[4] *The Boke of Curtasye*, BL, Sloane MS 1986, ed. F. J. Furnivall, in *Early English Meals and Manners*, EETS, os 32 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1868), 177, ll. 1–4.

your meal, with due attention to bodily decorum and social manners. The second part is addressed to young children, with a greater emphasis on moral instruction; and the third part is a series of job descriptions for the officers in a noble household, starting with the four who carry rods of office—porter, marshal, steward, and usher (the porter's rod is longest; the usher's the smallest; and the steward's is rather a staff 'to reule the men of court ymong'), and finishing with the chandler, who snuffs out the candles at the end of the day. Like most such texts, this *Boke* ranges freely between the normative and the prescriptive, the present and the future tense. Characteristically, the style of address is anonymous, impartial, classless: it can be used alike by teacher and student, parent and child.

The mobility and fluidity of address here are thrown into sharper contrast by comparison with earlier works of instruction for men and women in religious orders, which are conceived within a far more stable and specialized structure of authority. They often begin as if responding to a request for a disciplinary regime, like the English translation of Ailred of Rievaulx's *De institutione inclusarum*: 'Suster, thou hast ofte axed of me a forme of lyuynge accordyng to thyn estat, inasmuche as thou art enclosed.'[5] The author of *Ancrene Wisse* echoes Ailred: '... And ye my leue sustren habbeth mony day icraued on me after rule.'[6] Life in an anchorhold often seems the most extreme example of disciplinary subjection, a concentration of institutional and internalized surveillance. The modern spirit has difficulty imagining itself in that situation, and wanting yet *more* discipline, but the request for a rule might reflect a need for structure, as much as further subjection. In any case, the convention of seeking advice, of 'craving a rule', is one of long standing.

This trope is developed most fully as a narrative starting point in John Russell's *Boke of Nurture*, which opens in the mode of pastoral or *chanson d'aventure*. The narrator is wandering through a forest, and meets a young man who is 'semely' but 'sklendur' and 'leene'. He is unable to find a good master because he 'cowd no good', and was 'wantoun & nyce, recheles & lewde | as Iangelynge as a Iay'.[7] The narrator offers to teach him, and soon launches into a long disquisition that will help him find employment. The petitionary frame is not found in all works, of course, though it appears in a vestigial form in a number of shorter works. Many poems begin this way: 'Who-so wilneth to be wiis, & worschip desirith'; 'Who-so wylle of nurture lere'; and 'Who se euer wylle thryue or the'.[8] Or the presumption of a petitionary wish appears in the title, as in 'A generall Rule to teche euery man that is willinge for to lerne to serve a lorde or mayster in euery thyng to his plesure'.[9]

[5] Ailred of Rievaulx, *De institutione inclusarum: Two English Versions*, ed. John Ayto and Alexandra Barratt, EETS, os 287 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), Bodley MS 423, p. 1.

[6] Arne Zettersten and Bernhard Diensberg (eds.), *The English Text of the Ancrene Riwle: The 'Vernon' Text*, introd. H. L. Spencer, EETS, os 310 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

[7] Furnivall (ed.), *Early English Meals and Manners*, 3, l. 36.

[8] Ibid. 260, 262, 266.

[9] R. W. Chambers (ed.), *A Fifteenth-Century Courtesy Book* and Walter W. Seton (ed.), *Two Fifteenth-Century Franciscan Rules*, EETS, os 148 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1914).

The desire for instruction finds its most dramatic expression in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where Bertilak's court hovers around the knight hoping to receive training in good manners and good discourse from him. In this case, nurture is better learned *without* asking ('vnspurd'). Clearly, nurture and conduct are learnable, desirable techniques: there is little room here for the idea of any kind of innate knowledge of behaviour particular either to the aristocracy or indeed any class. Indeed, this is an important contrast between Arthur's and Bertilak's court, with the provincials aspiring to the artless grace of Camelot. If these are disciplinary regimes they are represented in these texts, at least, as voluntary ones.

Many texts simply assume the desirability of their advice. The fifteenth-century prose 'General Rule', quoted above, begins with the first action of the day: 'The marshall in the mornyng ought to come into the hall and se that it be clene of all maner thyng that may be fond unhoneste ther In ...' (p. 11). Many of the shorter texts similarly present their instructions quite baldly. As Elias remarks, many of these books probably encapsulate an oral tradition of material that is seen as unauthored, though no less authoritative on that account.

At the other extreme are texts that carefully address the concerns of a more readerly audience. The Knight de La Tour Landry is the most expansive and bookish of all such writers. He expresses his desire to teach his daughters, by asking a team of clerics and priests to assemble examples of good and bad women. Literary and popular anecdote provide his chief examples across a range of cultural fields from the exotic to the familiar. Narrative pleasure plays an important role in framing and softening the exemplary mode, a luxury reserved for texts directed at gentlemen and gentlewomen, though this is a contested and mutable category, especially in the fifteenth century.

Caxton's prefaces provide an intriguing insight into this issue, as they often seem concerned to frame particular texts for particular audiences. These prefaces give readers and consumers the sense that they may choose the text that best fits their situation. Perhaps this indirectly implies they may be able to choose which class to belong to, or at least, identify with. Moreover, if the performance of a social role can be learned and improved through the purchase of a book, this is a major concession that the ideology of the estates, as a codification of divisions that were supposed to be 'natural', is dissolving. Caxton's world is strikingly different from the world of *Piers Plowman*, for example, on the topic of knightood. Where Langland appeals to the traditional ideal of the knight's primary role as defending the Christian community, his static allegory never suggests that those not born to knighthood might wish or be able to aspire to its ideals (B. VI. 21–54).

Caxton's introduction to the *Ordre of Chyvalry* is ostensibly addressed to the upper classes:

> Whiche book is not requysyte to every comyn man to have, but to noble gentylmen that by their vertue entende to come and entre into the noble ordre of chyvalry, the

> whiche in these late dayes hath not ben used accordying to this booke heretofore wreton.[10]

But the key clause is the one addressed to those who 'entende to come and entre into the noble ordre of chyvalry', a reminder that entry into the status of 'knight' in the Middle Ages was not contingent simply on birth or hereditary title; it presumed a certain income and involved payment of a fee. Having acknowledged this mobility, though, Caxton offers a traditional lament on the decline of knighthood which moves quickly into a practical solution, the reading of romance:

> O ye knyghtes of Englond, where is the custome and usage of noble chyvalry that was used in tho dayes? What do ye now but go to the baynes [the baths] and playe atte dyse? And some not wel advysed use not honest and good rule ageyn alle order of knyghthode. Leve this. Leve it and rede the noble volumes of Saynt Graal, of Lancelot, of Galaad, of Trystram, of Perse Forest, of Percyval, of Gawayn and many mo. Ther shalle ye see manhode, curtosye and gentylnesse.

One of his imperatives is downright impatient. 'Rede Froissart', he orders. Caxton's knights are dissolute, unruly, and lazy, but his passionate vision for their improvement through reading and studying is entirely secular and courtly. It may also be commercial: as the publisher of Malory's tales, Caxton is actively creating a market for such works.

Caxton's preface to Higden's *Polychronicon*, on the other hand, appeals to a different audience, distinguishing less between common and knightly men, than between old and young.

> Historyes ought not only to be juged moost proffytable to yonge men whiche by the lecture, redyng and understandyng make them semblable and equale to men of greter age and to old men, to whome longe lyf hath mynystred experymentes of dyverse thynges, but also th'ystoryes able and make ryght pryvate men digne and worthy to have the governaunce of empyres and noble royammes. (p. 129)

This last clause also hints that the reading of history has the capacity to elevate 'pryvate men' to the status of rulers and governors. Again, Caxton appeals to a sense of class and social mobility for middle-class men, while also invoking the 'advice to rulers' genre, the *Secretum secretorum* tradition. By contrast, his *Eneydos* is emphatically not for 'rude men'; and there is very little sense in any of Caxton's prefaces or in any of the conduct books that women might also rise through modifying their behaviour. Where women readers are mentioned it is in far more static terms. The romance of *Blanchardin and Eglantine*, for example, is 'honeste and joyefull to all vertuouse yong noble gentylmen and wymmen for to rede therin, as for their passe-tyme' (p. 57).

[10] *Caxton's Own Prose*, ed. N. F. Blake (London: Andre Deutsch, 1973), 126. All further citations from Caxton refer to page numbers in this edition.

Social advancement is not possible for the lower classes: they need more direct forms of instruction to bring them up to the level of the human. Here is Caxton's prologue to the *Book of Good Manners*, translated from French:

> Whan I consydered the condycions and maners of the comyn people whiche without enformacion and lerning ben rude and not manerd, lyke unto beestis brute (acordyng to an olde proverbe he that is not manerd is no man, for maners make man), thenne is it requesite and necessary that every man use good and vertuous maners. (p. 60)

This preface closes with a benediction on those who shall 'rede or here it'; like many such texts, it is perhaps directed for training others. Caxton is not alone in his equivocations between the idea of texts that train, or bring to perfection; and texts that can improve or advance one's situation. Such evidence must indeed be employed with caution. Sponsler and Krueger 'show that the actual consumers of these texts are not necessarily the inscribed or intended readers',[11] while Mark Amos makes the argument that 'courtesy literature represented a site of struggle between the nobility and non-noble urban elites, as these two proximate classes attempted to control definitions of "gentle" behaviour': 'Each of the constituencies involved in the struggle over class honour in the late Middle Ages sought the distinction offered by such rarefied and artful behaviour, and each sought to naturalize those behaviours into an innate and unquestioned code of superiority.'[12] Writing of the sixteenth century, Frank Whigham makes a similar point: if Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* was designed to expose those social upstarts who aspired to the status of courtier, it also codified the desired behavioural norms both for the 'members of an endangered aristocracy' *and* for anyone else who could read.[13]

Three illustrative topics

1. Carving: 'dysfygyre that pecocke transsene that ele'

Despite its very practical orientation, equivocation of address and purpose is a regular feature of conduct literature. These works characteristically presuppose a subject-in-process, but in process of becoming ... what? Grown up? Socially mobile? Further advanced in one's career? Many of the nurture books are concerned with the rules governing the preparation, serving, and consumption of food at the courtly table: the feast is an important occasion for conspicuous consumption and display,

[11] See the essays by Claire Sponsler and Roberta L. Krueger in Ashley and Clark (eds.), *Medieval Conduct*, and also Tracy Adams, '"Noble, wyse and grete lordes, gentilmen and marchauntes": Caxton's Prologues as Conduct Books for Merchants', *Parergon*, 22/2 (2005), 53–76.

[12] Mark Addison Amos, '"For Manners Make Man": Bourdieu, de Certeau, and the Common Appropriation of Noble Manners in *The Book of Courtesy*', in Ashley and Clarke (eds.), *Medieval Conduct*, 30.

[13] Frank Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 18–19.

and the exercise of social command of the self and of others. The self-in-training addressed here is often the young man, inhabiting the ambiguous territory between the roles of servant, courtier, and the squire being prepared for a knightly career.

The most famous such figure is Chaucer's Squire, exemplifying the nobility of youth as he carves and serves meat to his father. The squire also carves before his lord in Chaucer's 'Summoner's Tale' and 'Merchant's Tale', where Damian carves for January. In the earlier *King Horn*, Aylmar has his steward Athelbrus take charge of young Horn's education, that he might learn the noble arts of hunting, playing the harp, carving, and serving. In the public rituals of the courtly household, the carving and serving of meat is a rich social act, often worthy of special comment in both chronicle and romance. The squire proves he is learning the kind of discipline that will make him a knight; the king does honour to his guests; the senior courtier claims an intimacy with the king's household.[14]

The complex terminology of service reflects some of the ambiguities here. Kate Mertes shows how many of the titles of household occupations as they appear in account books, such as '*generosus* or armigerous, *valettus, garcio*, and pagettus/puer', encrypt an elaborate series of changing relationships between service and gentility, and between youth and experience.[15] Squires and junior knights might serve in a lord's household: child servants, too, might be well-born children serving in another aristocratic household to receive a 'military, social, and academic education'. But the term *pagetti* or *pueri* might also be used to describe children from much humbler families who were employed in the household with the hopes of reaching a permanent position there, rather than receiving training for an aristocratic career. As Mertes writes, 'one must caution that all these ranks, while constant in themselves, did not fix or define individuals.... The household could be a signal way of social and material advancement; the ranks within it were, as we have seen, a matter of relative and rather loosely defined status, but imposed no ultimate restrictions on the servant who was named with them.'[16]

Unlike nearly every other aspect of serving meals, carving required special skills, and so it is one of the richest and most ambiguous social acts. The trope of the 'kitchen knight' in romance indicates how porous are some of these boundaries. Sir Kay's job, as the steward, is to serve the king, from a position of honour, but when knights like Gareth or Lancelot are put to work in the filth of the kitchen, this is one of the most humiliating fates for a knight. However, such knights never remain there. Gareth eventually fights his way to courtly pre-eminence, so that the three most powerful knights he defeats petition to be given posts respectively as his carver, chamberlain, and butler. Sarah Gordon comments of three such romances:

[14] Ernest P. Kuhl and Henry J. Webb, 'Chaucer's Squire', *English Literary History*, 6 (1939), 282–4.

[15] Kate Mertes, *The English Noble Household 1250–1600: Good Governance and Politic Rule* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 26.

[16] Ibid. 31.

'The contrast of noble/servant is given a complex, ironic treatment related to the dichotomies of appearance/reality and nature/nurture, omnipresent themes in medieval literature ... the discourse of knights in the kitchen begins to reveal the possibility, threat and promise of upward and downward social mobility.'[17] If romances can rehearse these possibilities, the conduct books provide the manuals for such upward mobility. Treatises about carving and serving complement the display of feasting celebrated in the menus of poems like *Wynnere and Wastoure* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure.*

The young man in Russell's *Boke* has some sense of the complexities to be learned:

> 'Good syr, y yow praye the connynge of kervynge ye wille me teche,
> and the fayre handlynge of a knyfe, y yow beseche,
> alle wey where y shalle alle maner fowles breke, unlace, or seche,
> and with Fysche or flesche, how shalle y demene me with eche.'[18]

Russell's *Boke* expounds in some detail how to hold one's three knives, how to prepare the bread trenchers on which the meat is served, and the particular methods of serving the appropriate food for the appropriate occasion. Like many such books that expound a *techné* in this way, Russell's text loves the signifier. Carving demands a specific and precise vocabulary and procedures: it is a very textual art. The first point is to know which meats are 'fumose', and Russell offers this alliterative (and remarkably unmemorable) mnemonic:

> F is the furst that is, Fatt, Farsed & Fried;
> R, raw resty, and rechy, ar comberous vndefied;
> S salt sowre and sowse all such thow set a-side. (ll. 357–9)

The *Boke of Kervynge*, printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1508, has hardly begun before it launches into a surreal list of imperatives, a string of matching verbs and meats:

Breke that dere	tyere that egge
lesche that brawne	chyne that samon
rere that goose	strynge that lampraye
lyft that swanne	splatte that pyke
sauce that capon	sauce that playce
spoyle that henne	sauce that tenche
frusshe that chekyn	splaye that breme
vnbrace that malarde	syde that haddocke
vnlace that cony	tuske that barbell
dysmembre that heron	culpon that troute
dysplaye that crane	fynne that cheuen
dsyfygyre that pecocke	transsene that ele[19]

[17] Sarah Gordon, 'Kitchen Knights in Medieval French and English Narrative: Rainouart, Lancelot, Gareth', *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 16 (2005), 189–212, at 209.
[18] Furnivall (ed.), *Early English Meals and Manners*, 21, ll. 313–16. [19] Ibid. 151, ll. 1–12.

Reading this list produces a similar response to the hunting scenes in poems like *Sir Gawain*. Modern readers tend to glaze over the difficult vocabulary, appreciating the narrative patterning of the poem and the symbolism of the hunt but without really wanting to absorb or own the details. In each text, every kind of animal requires its own special method of capture and killing, dismemberment in the field, preparing in the kitchen, and carving at the table. The *public* interaction between gentleman and animal, at first raw and then cooked, is crucial in both hunting and carving. The carver is on public display in the formality of the hall, and may be carrying out his task before lords who were once themselves squire-carvers in other households. No wonder the man in Russell's book wants to know 'how shalle y demene me with eche', referring to his comportment with each different kind of meat. The meat is to be presented to the lord, again in different fashion according to the animal, and on the carefully prepared bread trenchers, and always subject to what the lord wants. The instructions are detailed to the left and right hand to be used with each knife, whether the legs or wings or left or right wing of the bird are to be served first, whether the rabbit is to be laid on its back or its belly at different stages in the carving. The art of carving is the art of the proper, the love of the right way to handle and serve the right meat at the right time of the year; the *Boke of Kervynge* is closely concerned with menus for feasts at different times of the liturgical year.

The *Babees Book* explains why carving and consumption of food are important to the noble household:

> Kutte nouhte youre meete eke as it were Felde men,
> That to theyre mete haue suche an appetyte
> That they ne rekke in what wyse, where ne when,
> Nor how vngoodly they on theyre mete twyte [hack, cut] ... [20]

Readers of *The Book of Margery Kempe* know that food and its consumption are crucial theatres for the performance of spiritual virtues and their sometimes uncomfortable relation to courtly or social ones.[21] The possibilities for social decorum to go astray seem endless, at every level of gesture, discourse, and comportment of the body: the art of fine eating is the art of not seeming to need to eat.

2. The Mouth

> Grennynge and mowes at the table eschowe;
> Cry nat to lowde; kepe honestly silence;
> To enboce thy Iowis withe mete is nat diewe;

[20] Furnivall (ed.), *Early English Meals and Manners*, 256, ll. 175–8.

[21] See for example, Margery's trials with her fellow pilgrims at Seryce, in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Harlow: Longman, 2000), ll. 1966–98, and 2045–80, pp. 151–2, 154–6.

Withe ful mowthe speke nat, lest thow do offence;
Drynk nat bretheles for hast ne necligence;
Kepe clene thy lippes from fat of flesshe or fisshe;
Wype clene thy spone, leve it nat in thy dissche.[22]

Of all the body parts these regimes seek to discipline, the eyes, hands, and mouth feature most extensively. The mouth constellates two sets of anxieties about consumption of food and proper speech. This is particularly the case at the monastic table, as Nicholls shows, where rules and principles of conduct sometimes seem haunted by the familiar barbs of estates satire, and their sense that monastic orders sometimes had trouble with the vows of abstinence. The dreamer's experience at Conscience's feast in Passus XIII of *Piers Plowman* similarly shows how highly charged is feasting as a focus for ethical and religious issues.

Much of the discourse of the mouth, like carving, is implicitly about distinguishing one's social class by one's behaviour. The *Babees Book* commends the babies, those of royal blood, to wipe their mouths clean with a cloth (like the young lady in *Le Roman de la Rose* (ll. 13385–456) and Chaucer's Prioress). The knife is not to be brought into the mouth, and the children are particularly instructed not to stuff their cheeks full of food. Here they are threatened by the comparison with the non-human:

Let neuer thy cheke be Made to grete
With morselle of brede that thou shalle ete;
An apys mow men sayne he makes,
That brede and flesshe in hys cheke bakes. (p. 179, ll. 57–60)

The mouth is an organ dangerously close to being uncontrollable. Not only is eating a natural function that animals perform without constraint of manners; the mouth is also the site of so many ungovernable, involuntary acts such as yawning, choking, vomiting, excessive laughter, and so on. We might argue that these texts construct the proper behaviour of the mouth so attentively because they are haunted by their opposite, the carnivalesque body, and the carnivalesque feast as the site of excess, animalistic appetite, and the threat of social reversal.

Eating and drinking, like the service and distribution of food, are highly charged activities, as Caroline Walker Bynum shows so powerfully.[23] Even in the secular court context, physical and especially culinary conduct are frequently linked to moral conduct. The Knight de La Tour Landry specializes in making these connections; he tells of a young woman who habitually spoiled her two little dogs, even though she had been warned by a friar against this practice, 'and the pore pepille so lene and famisshed for hunger'.

[22] *Stans puer ad mensam*, in Furnivall (ed.), *Early English Meals and Manners*, 277, ll. 29–36.

[23] Caroline Walker, Bynum *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), esp. ch. 3, 73–111.

> And after she happed she deied, and there fell a wonder mervailous sight, for there was seyn euer on her bedde. ij. litelle blake dogges, and in her deyeng thei were about her mouthe and liked [licked] it, and whanne she was dede, there the dogges had lyked it was al blacke as cole.[24]

The *Male Regle* of Thomas Hoccleve also gives us a characteristically dramatic vision of what happens when the body refuses and resists this discipline, when 'Excess' becomes one's dining partner, 'at borde hath leyd his knyf with me':

> The custume of my repleet abstinence,
> My greedy mowth, receite of swich outrage,
> And hondes two, as woot my negligence,
> Thus han me gyded and broght in seruage
> Of hir that werreieth euery age,
> Seeknesse, Y meene, riotoures whippe,
> Habundantly that paieth me my wage,
> So that me neithir daunce list, ne skippe.[25]

No problem with readerly fatigue, here: Hoccleve's readiness to expound on his bad habits, and the temptations of the tavern—sweet wine, thick wafers, and the 'fressh repeir' of pretty women—offers a fascinating glimpse of everyday misrule. Like the confessions of the Deadly Sins in *Piers Plowman*, this seems to reveal a more individualized subject than we find in the perfect, compliant, and unhurried eaters of the model texts. Hoccleve's misrule of mouth and belly leads not only to sickness, but also to the disordering of the social. In summer it is too hot to walk, and in winter the road is too muddy, so in any season, weighted down by 'superfluitee', Hoccleve takes the boat home, overtipping the boatmen, who in turn flatter him and call him 'maistir'. His vanity gratified, he tips them some more. 'Methoughte I was ymaad a man for euere', he says, the impersonal verb reminding us that on the contrary, he is in the process of unmaking himself. Like many writers, Hoccleve associates excess in eating and drinking with the misrule of speech.

Many texts make the same easy transition from eating to conversing, like the *Young Children's Book*, written around 1500.

> And whylle thi mete yn thi mouth is,
> Drynk thou not; for-gete not this.
> Ete thi mete by smalle mosselles;
> Fylle not thy mouth as done brothellis.
> Pyke not thi tethe with thy knyfe;
> In no company begynne thow stryfe[26]

[24] *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, ed. Thomas Wright, EETS, os 22 (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1868), 29.

[25] Thomas Hoccleve, *'My Compleinte' and Other Poems*, ed. Roger Ellis (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), 67, ll. 113–20.

[26] Furnivall (ed.), *Early English Meals and Manners*, 267, ll. 35–40.

The emphasis on careful speech segues easily into the category of political poetry, which abounds in cautions about the dangers of loose speech and flattery. The relationship between the physical governance of the mouth and the monitoring of its counsel warrants fuller study.

3. Touch

> *'The ancre ne hire meiden ne plohien worldliche gomenes ed te thurle, ne ne ticki togederes ...'*
>
> *[The recluse and her maid should not play worldly games at the window, or romp together.]*

Human touch is rarely foregrounded in the literature of conduct, unless the lesson is specifically about sexuality. The Knight de La Tour Landry, for example, writes in detail about the dangers of touch as the prelude to further sexual engagement, while Mirk's *Instructions for Parish Priests* mentions touch as one of the five wits to be enquired after in the confessional. The various prescriptions about separate beds in monastic houses are predicated on similar concerns. Touch is nearly always invoked only in a sexual context, and often quite graphically. Calling on the hysteria that often surrounded the chastity of women, the Knight writes of a virtuous daughter who prays assiduously for the dead. She is rewarded when an amorous knight comes to her room but sees her as if lying surrounded by the dead. At this sight, his erotic imperative is short-lived.

Sexual touch is usually less Gothic, and more quotidian. Another daughter is not so well governed, to the point of being spoiled and indulged when she pleads a headache as a reason not to spend longer at her devotions. When she is married, her husband turns for her in the night, but finds her in the wardrobe with her ladies and two men singing and crying out. One man has his hand 'vnder one of the wommanes clothes'. The virtuous husband strikes him, but a splinter blinds his wife, whereupon the husband stops loving her and the household falls into ruin. This is a story of wild disproportion at every level, but its mention of the casual hand under the dress seems to bring the cheerful and sexually explicit marginalia of medieval devotional texts into much closer dialogue with the everyday world of the household.

These texts have much less to say about social (non-sexual) touch, though this is a promising area of speculation. Why are we so struck when Criseyde pulls Pandarus by the hood, or when he stuffs Troilus' letter down the front of her dress? When Bertilak's lady puts her hands on either side of Gawain's body, making him her prisoner? When Bertilak himself 'laches' him by a fold of his clothing, to bring Gawain to sit next to him, instead of with the ladies? What can texts of conduct and nurture tell us about the social boundaries of the medieval self, in an era well before the concept of 'personal space' became so intimately tied to our own sense of self?

The evidence is slight, but suggestive. An intriguing prohibition is offered by Mirk, who specifies that when the godparents bring the child to be baptized, they should not 'holde' the childe during the service.[27] A more expansive example is found at the very end of the *Ancrene Wisse*: 'The ancre ne hire meiden ne plohien worldliche gomenes ed te thurle, ne ne ticki togederes.'[28] The author quotes St Bernard on the capacity for 'every such pleasure of the flesh' to diminish the spiritual life. This is intriguing not only for the glimpse into the relationship between anchoress and maid and the vision of the worldly games they might play at their window, but also for the acknowledgement that comfort and pleasure are to be derived from casual physical contact. The *MED* offers only this one instance of 'ticki', and glosses it thus: 'To touch or pat a person as part of a game, dally frivolously'. Did medieval people touch, hold, and pat each other to the same extent we do? What other hints can we find of human touch in the Middle Ages?

Fashioning a self

Confessional manuals reveal the medieval self as a work in progress, subject to reform, scrutiny, and development. The growth in the literature of instruction in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries also suggests a growing consciousness that one might lead a different kind of life from one's parents, and experience dramatic shifts in one's social sphere and social role as well as spiritual life.

In this final section, I want to consider briefly the extent to which we might use the literature of conduct to worry away at the boundaries of the Middle Ages, and the sense of self we associate with them. This remains one of the important preoccupations of medieval studies: the extent to which late medieval selves might anticipate the sixteenth-century sense, in Stephen Greenblatt's famous formulation, 'that there were both selves and a sense that they could be fashioned'.[29] Greenblatt's first example is one that resonates powerfully with this chapter, and with the late medieval preoccupation with feasting as social situation: Sir Thomas More's account of a dinner party at Cardinal Wolsey's, in which a clever priest stages a brilliant, if wordless piece of flattery of his host. Greenblatt further diagnoses More's own court performances, all the while citing contemporary evidence for the understanding of the life of the courtier as a play, a deliberately orchestrated drama of the self.

[27] John Myrc, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. Edward Peacock, EETS, os 31 (London: Trübner & Co., 1868), 6, l. 16.

[28] Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (eds.), *Medieval English Prose for Women, from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 148, ll. 4–5.

[29] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980).

To what extent do medieval texts begin to anticipate such consciousness? Greenblatt is the first to admit that medieval writers like Chaucer certainly evince something of the 'manipulation' of identity, while writers such as Margery Kempe and Thomas Hoccleve testify to a high degree of consciousness about social fashioning. Hoccleve's famous leaps in front of his mirror, trying to catch himself in the act of looking normal, are the most poignant example, but these would be exceptional in any age. Kempe's social and religious performances, too, are hardly indicative of any quotidian or normative understanding of the self.

Susan Crane has explored the 'formal, festive, and most often ritual contexts' in costume, heraldry, and social ritual,[30] but the literature of conduct seems a promising place to look for less formal instances of social performance. If behaviour can be learned and taught, is there any sense that the squire carving before his lord, for example, is fashioning a self? Or is he only ever rehearsing his carefully acquired skills, and wearing the mask of politeness that was recognized as a feature of court life from the early medieval period?[31] The Middle English literature of conduct does not address this issue in a frontal way. Hoccleve himself, when diagnosing his own *male regle*, assumes a conventional understanding of vice as the absence of virtue: he ignores the advice of reason and as a result becomes ill through excessive consumption. Similarly, when Damian carves before January, he can hardly stand, so beset is he with desire for May. But the Merchant narrator sees simple treachery:

> O perilous fyr, that in the bedstraw bredeth!
> O famulier foo, that his servyce bedeth!
> O servant traytour, false hoomly hewe,
> Lyk to the naddre in bosom sly untrewe,
> God shilde us all from youre aqueyntaunce! (IV. 1783–7)

This is a simple opposition between outward demeanour and inner desire: dissimulation, not self-fashioning.

Yet we should not overlook the subtlety of conduct literature's strategies, offering advice for social survival in what could be potentially very fraught and tense situations, especially eating a meal with one's superiors. These conventions, linking manners, ethics, and morals, persist well into the Renaissance and beyond: only much later are manners and morals more profoundly separated. The spectacular court performances of the Renaissance take place against a background that maintains and enforces many of the conventions and the technologies of selfhood established in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

A further investigation might focus on the kind of writerly performances the texts represent, particularly in the 'advice to rulers' genre. The careful self-positioning of

[30] Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity during the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

[31] C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals 939–1210* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 7.

the poet giving advice, needing to condemn the ruler's flatterers without seeming, himself, to flatter; needing to warn the ruler against those who give bad advice without seeming, himself, to give bad advice—might well be seen as at least prefiguring the self-fashioning of which Greenblatt writes. The narrative framing and the gendering of advice might also be instructive here. Although Chaucer has his male advice-givers, like Placebo and Justinus in the 'Merchant's Tale', his *Canterbury Tales* foreground several instances where Chaucer writes of wives and mothers giving advice: Prudence, the old woman in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale', the Manciple's other. Similarly, Felicity Riddy has suggested that the female narrator of *The Good Wife Teaches her Daughter* might well represent the performance of a male writer.[32] How do male and female parents, speakers, and writers differ in the giving of advice, and the raising of children? To what extent can these examples be seen as performances, or indeed, as exhibiting the performativity we now associate with all exercise of gendered behaviour? Medieval literature is full of philosophical women who give advice. How many such figures appear in early modern literature and in what contexts? Does the gradual separation of ethics from courtesy have implications for the role of women as nurturers and teachers, as the Middle Ages pass into the Renaissance?

FURTHER READING

The very broadest contexts for the study of medieval conduct literature are works of sociology and anthropology that explore the ways humans have shaped and organize society. Key works in this field have been Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* and *The Logic of Practice*, Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (n. 3 above). Many of the essays in Kathleen Ashley and Robert Clarke's collection *Medieval Conduct* (n. 2) develop methods of analysis drawing on these methodological perspectives, in greater detail than has been possible in this essay.

Claire Sponsler's *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) similarly includes a chapter on 'Conduct Books and Good Governance' that explores the insights of conduct books into the inner workings of the late medieval 'habitus', a term coined and used by Bourdieu in *The Logic of Practice*. Like Susan Crane in *The Performance of Self* (n. 30), Sponsler ranges over literary and historical texts, and other documents in the social construction of the medieval self. Less theoretical in orientation, Jonathan Nicholls's *The Matter of Courtesy* (n. 1) remains an excellent starting point as a survey of the relevant literature in Middle English.

C. Stephen Jaeger's *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals 939–1210* (n. 31), provides a longer, older, and European context for the

[32] Felicity Riddy, 'Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text', *Speculum*, 71 (1996), 66–86, at 73.

medieval English tradition of court culture, and a thoughtful critique of some aspects of Elias's work.

Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), and Nicholas Perkins, *Hoccleve's* Regiment of Princes: *Counsel and Constraint* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001) both present subtle accounts of Middle English books that offer conduct advice to rulers, and of the difficulties of offering counsel to lords.

Much current interest in this field is focused on texts directed to a female audience. Essays by Daniel T. Kline, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih, in Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (eds.), *Medieval Women's Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) explore some of the expectations of women's social conduct in this period. Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270–1540* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) draws on a broad range of sources to consider the upbringing, education, and training of women.

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