

*Introduction**A is for artisan*

In the image that appears on the following page and on the cover of this book, a man stands with his arms spread wide along the left side of a red and blue timber-framed building, in front of which lie an awl, an axe, a mallet, and a crowbar (Figure 1.1). At first glance, it is easy to think that this is a proud craftsman who has put down his tools to admire, perhaps even to embrace, his finished work. The accompanying text, however – one of many entries in the fourteenth-century *Omne bonum*, the vast though unfinished encyclopedia by the Englishman and Exchequer clerk James le Palmer (d. 1375) – tells a different story. The book uses the building as the initial *A* of the entry for *arena* [sand], which it promptly allegorizes as material for the Devil's work. Borrowing from the fifth-century *Opus imperfectum* (spuriously attributed to John Chrysostom [c. 347–407]), an incomplete but very influential commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, it explains:

Christus enim est sapiens vir qui edificavit domum suam idest ecclesiam super petram idest fortitudinem fidei . . . Vir stultus est dyabolus . . . Iste igitur dyabolus insipiens vir edificavit domum super arenam . . . Ita & impii sunt domus dyaboli edificati autem super arenam, idest super inconstanciam infidelitatis. Si enim constancia fidei dicitur petra, recte inconstancia infidelitatis, arena vocatur, idest ydolatria . . .

Christ is indeed the wise man who built his house, that is, his Church, on a rock, that is, on the strength of faith . . . the foolish man is the Devil . . . Therefore, this Devil, a foolish man, built a house on sand . . . And thus the impious are houses of the Devil, also built on sand, that is, on the inconstancy of faithlessness. If indeed the constancy of faith is called stone, rightly is the inconstancy of faithlessness called sand, that is, idolatry . . . ¹

Far from the admirable worker we might have first taken him to be, it seems that the peaceable-looking craftsman of the illumination is, if not quite the Devil himself, then a foolish idolater. At the very least, he is revealed as a



Figure 1.1 A carpenter builds his house on sand (entry for “arena”). From James le Palmer, *Omne bonum*. © The British Library Board. London. British Library MS Royal 6.E.VI, fol. 148v. (1360–75).

Introduction: A is for artisan

3

bad carpenter who is reaching up his arms not to display the product of his labor, but rather to prevent it from collapsing.

The tension between the seemingly laudatory illumination of the artisan posed before his creation and the condemnatory allegory in which he is deployed and deplored in the *Omne bonum* is an example in small of the larger subject of this book. As its title suggests, my primary aim is to explore some – by no means all – of the stories that late medieval English culture told itself about artisans, while my principal argument is that the impulse to tell those stories is a fundamental aspect of late medieval cultural and narrative practice. We can already see the two sides of the story that I hope to tell about artisanal representation at work in James le Palmer's encyclopedia: carpenters, as the image for *arena* instructs us in fairly straightforward visual terms, make buildings out of wood with tools, an activity so immediately recognizable and socially significant that the house this carpenter has made can stand for the first letter of the alphabet: *A*. This *A* is both a letter painted on parchment (a literal figure, as it were) and a figurative house (a picture of a building). But it is something more as well, something that only a reading of the passage at whose beginning it stands reveals. While the *A* is the first letter of the *arena* [sand] that is the foolhardy carpenter's foundation, it also seems to allude to the *artifex* [artisan] standing beside the house, the craftsman who at first appears to be starring in a story of craft production, but who is in fact a figure for the faithless, those who have failed to learn the spiritual lessons taught by the divine *Artifex* (God) and his Son.² Lucy Freeman Sandler remarks that the illumination "in taking the metaphors [of the text] literally . . . fails to embody their overall meaning visually."³ But it is precisely that failure – the way, that is, in which the carpenter might at first be taken for a dutiful worker – that makes him also a useful reminder of the tension between the concrete and the abstract that characterizes much medieval literature in general and the texts I examine in this book in particular. Caught between the earthly (here, the sandy) and the divine, between matter and metaphor, and between work and words, the carpenter of the *Omne bonum* can therefore also serve as a figure for how productive the space between these different yet related poles of human experience was for medieval writers who, as this study will show, often chose to bridge it with an image (or many) of an artisan.

And the *Omne bonum*'s carpenter is just that: an image, one that as I have been suggesting is jointly produced for the reader by picture and text. This book is a study of such images, albeit primarily verbal ones; it explores the way that artisans are depicted in medieval English literature, and attempts

to delineate the impact those depictions have upon both the form and the content of the texts in which they appear. While I hope to have produced a useful account of the varied roles that artisans and artisanal imagery play in late medieval didactic and imaginative writing, with the exception of my discussion of the masons' manuscripts in Chapter 2 I do not attempt to provide a new history of actual (as opposed to fictional) medieval artisans. Instead, I rely on the work of those in disciplines other than my own, within whose narratives about the Middle Ages – especially in the fields of economic, institutional, social, and intellectual history – artisans have long had a central place. It will be useful briefly to review these approaches here, both as a way of introducing the broader context for this book and as a way of explaining its relationship to the other histories that have been and continue to be written about the practitioners, processes, and products of medieval craft labor.

IMAG(IN)ING ARTISANS: REALITIES AND REPRESENTATIONS

Perhaps the most familiar narrative about medieval artisans is one version or another of the history of the guilds, those predominantly but not exclusively urban institutions into which most medieval artisans across Europe organized – sometimes voluntarily, sometimes less so – from the twelfth century. Like all historiographies, the literature on this topic tends to reflect the era in which it is produced. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, English guilds were often read nostalgically as the humane opposite of industrial organization. The signal example here is that of Karl Marx, for whom the medieval guild system, though it “create[d] the material conditions for the existence of manufacture,” nevertheless kept “the labourer and his means of production . . . closely united, like the snail with its shell,” and prevented “the separation of the labourer from his means of production, and the conversion of these means to capital.”⁴ Several decades later, other scholars were to see guilds in a far more negative light, as misguided attempts to hold back “modern” progress toward open trade in free markets.⁵ The histories of English and continental guilds being written today are by contrast far more complex, and often as localized, as the guilds were themselves, for scholars increasingly recognize – as I also argue in this book – that there is no one story that can be told about artisans, no teleology into which all craftsmen in all places can be made easily to fit.

If there is any consensus about medieval craft guilds and their members today, it lies precisely in a recognition of this fundamental irreducibility –

something, as we shall see, that much medieval literature happily ignores – though this is not to say that the history of guilds does not continue to be written.⁶ Influenced especially by the work of Heather Swanson on the artisan guilds of York, however, the study of medieval English craft has shifted in the past two decades toward an examination of artisanal *culture* that attends to both craft labor and craft life as forms of practice, bodies of knowledge, and realms of experience that distinguished medieval artisans from other members of the social body (including those agricultural workers with whom they are often grouped at the bottom of society in estates literature).⁷ These accounts include a renewed attention to guild records, textual sites within which competing urban interests – artisanal, of course, but also mercantile, ecclesiastical, royal – find (often unresolved) expression.⁸ Of interest in their own right, the records have provided new insights into the professional and social contests exposed within and between Chaucer's tales of Miller, Reeve, and Cook, artisans all; they have also contributed to new readings of the laboring craftspeople of whom Will dreams in the Prologue of *Piers Plowman* and the professional skills that Grace distributes as gifts to humankind near that same poem's end.⁹

But for the most part the story of the role artisans play in the medieval English literary landscape has been told largely through readings of the texts and contexts of the Corpus Christi cycles, those massive public performances of Biblical history from Creation to Doomsday that were financed and produced each year by the craft guilds of the (mostly) northern towns of England from at least the late fourteenth century and well into the sixteenth.¹⁰ In contrast, one of the goals of this book is to bring forward far less-studied texts in which artisans are revealed as a distinct part of the period's cultural imaginary, similar to but also quite different from those who performed other kinds of work.¹¹ Here I follow in the methodological footsteps of those who have attended to the characterization of particular estates both in medieval writing that is self-consciously literary and, like many of the texts I explore in this book, less evidently so; Paul Freedman's work on the figure of the peasant, for example, demonstrates the intellectual rewards that can result from attending to the representation of one limb of the medieval body politic at a time.¹²

I want to stress the term *representation*, by which I mean a signifying practice that, as Terry Eagleton puts it, “depends on a difference between what presents and what is presented,” for the representations I examine here frequently fail to mirror in any direct way the complex world beyond the texts in which they appear.¹³ As Swanson and others have noted, by the

later Middle Ages the occupational and social label of “artisan” applied to those engaged in a wide variety of industries, from baking and butchering to building and gold-smithing; it included not only those who were, as Swanson writes, “skilled manufacturers, processing goods for sale,” but also those like fishmongers, who did no processing at all, and those who, like inn-keepers, provided services as well as goods to their customers.¹⁴ Furthermore, hardly any members of the artisanal class made their living by a single craft, despite the efforts of municipal and national government to restrict their economic activities within one guild’s bounds – among which efforts one of the most notable is the statute issued by Edward III in 1363 (best known for its enactment of sumptuary law) demanding that “artificers gentz de meistere se teignent chescun a un meister” [artificers, handicraft people, hold them every one to one mystery]. And while this and other related legislation was directed largely at urban residents, artisanal work was the exclusive prerogative neither of city dwellers nor of the middle estate, for peasants in rural areas are known to have worked at crafts as well as in the fields, particularly during the winter months in order to supplement their income.¹⁵ Finally, and as we will see further in Chapter 1, the line between artisans and merchants was a fine one, and frequently crossed. Those who made goods for sale were eager to sell them without the interference of middlemen, a desire that conflicted with the attempts of merchant guilds in towns other than London to reserve the prerogative of sale for themselves; even in London, where all with freedom of the city had the right to trade, most guilds were controlled by those who had risen through the ranks to become sellers of the goods produced by their crafts’ less powerful members.

Virtually all of these subtleties, however, were by and large ignored by medieval authors, who generally chose to figure artisans either as an undifferentiated mass of makers, distinguished as a group from agricultural workers but not from each other, or else as individual men (despite the important role played by women in many medieval industries) working in a single and sometimes even unspecified craft. I will often have occasion to speak broadly of “artisans” and “*the* artisan” in the chapters that follow, but when I do so I am referring quite consciously and almost without exception to the generalizations of the texts themselves. Not quite characters but also not exclusively types, the *craftsmen* and very occasional *craftswomen* who appear in the works I examine here are perhaps best understood by way of Elizabeth Fowler’s term *social persons*: “models of the person, familiar concepts of social being that attain currency through common use.” For Fowler, social persons “are very much like literary genres, because they

Introduction: A is for artisan

7

depend upon the recognition of convention . . . better regarded as cumulative and changing sets of resemblances than as susceptible to definition by a list of features.”¹⁶ What I attempt to do in this book is chart the way the social person of the artisan intersects with, appears differently within, and has an impact upon the conventions of several different medieval genres, some of which are not (at least not explicitly) about craft at all. The most important insight that I think this charting produces is that artisans are social persons about whom medieval authors wanted to think and that, to borrow Lévi-Strauss’ famous phrase, they also found “bonne à penser” [good to think] with.¹⁷

As Daniel Miller observes, “humanity constantly returns to vast projects [religious, philosophical, economic] devoted to immateriality . . . But all these rest upon the same paradox: that immateriality can only be expressed through materiality.” Thus, he suggests, “we approach a kind of general rule: the more humanity reaches toward the conceptualization of the immaterial, the more important the specific form of its materialization.”¹⁸ I find this formulation helpful as a way of starting to understand why it is that medieval authors working in different spheres and in different genres shared an impulse to depict the artisan, and why these textual elites not only were fascinated by craft production, but also were able to find in the most material of acts – the making of an object with tools – a language widely adaptable to the representation of the admirable and the abhorrent in discourses having little to do with the daily rigors of artisanal life.

For the intellectuals of the early Middle Ages – heirs, as we shall see further in Chapter 4, to Plato and Aristotle’s use of analogies drawn from the concrete world of *technē* [craft] to explore the most abstract of political and ethical issues – craft labor was especially good to think with because it provided a way to consider the coming-to-be of the material world and to celebrate its maker as God the *Artifex*, master-craftsman of the universe, to whom I have already alluded above.¹⁹ Long before it became a commonplace of the twelfth-century cosmographical tradition – appearing prominently, for example, in Alan of Lille’s *De planctu Naturae* (c. 1160–65) and *Anticlaudianus* (c. 1182–84)²⁰ – this extremely influential trope had emerged in the hexaemeral literature of the early Church. As Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) explains in his *Homilies*:

in artibus effectricibus, cessante etiam operatione, opus remanet; exempli causa, opus artis ædificandi, fabricandi, excudendi, texendi, et aliarum quarumcunque artium ejus generis: quæ artifice vel absente abunde in seipsis causas solertes ac

industrias exhibent, potesque ædificatorem ærariumque et textorem post opus admirari. Proinde ut mundus demonstretur esse artificialis structura, omnibus ad contemplationem proposita, adeo ut per ipsum conditoris ejus sapientia cognoscatur, non alia ulla voce sapiens Moyses usus es, dum de eo sermonem habuit; sed dixit: *In principio fecit*.

in the case of the creative skills, even though the action ceases, the work remains, as that of architecture, carpentry, metalwork, weaving and of as many such arts as, even if the craftsman is not present, ably manifest in themselves the artistic processes of thoughts, and make it possible for you to admire the architect from his work, as well as the metalworker and the weaver. That it might be shown, then, that the world is a work of art, set before all for contemplation, so that through it the wisdom of He who created it should be known, the wise Moses used no other word concerning it, but he said: “In the beginning he created.”²¹

Basil’s *Homilies*, and this passage in particular, are often cited at the outset of another history of artisans on which this book has occasion to rely – one that runs parallel to, yet rarely intersects with, the more archival scholarship on guilds and guild culture mentioned above. This is the story told by intellectual historians about the changing attitude toward the *artes mechanicae* [mechanical arts] revealed in medieval taxonomies of knowledge; it emphasizes the degree to which artisans were increasingly acknowledged in such texts as essential contributors to and shapers of human existence in a postlapsarian world. Although God had punished Adam and Eve for their disobedience with labor in field and in childbirth (Genesis 3:16–19), the deity had also sanctioned artisanal work in the service of worship, calling upon the craftsmen Bezalel and Ooliab to build and furnish the Tabernacle and clothe its priests (Exodus 31:1–11, 35:30–35, and 36–39, passages celebrating what would later become the ecclesiastical luxury critiqued for its excesses by Bernard of Clairvaux in twelfth-century France and the Lollards in late fourteenth-century England).²² Beyond this evident stamp of divine approval upon the crafts, the economic expansion of the twelfth century saw artisans (along with other urban professionals like merchants, lawyers, and doctors) rise to increasing social and political prominence in secular life – a phenomenon that required increasingly fine adjustments to the traditional model of society’s “three orders.”²³ The special hero of this trajectory in accounts of this changing view of artisans, though he stands closer to its beginning than its end, is the Benedictine Hugh of St. Victor, whose *Didascalicon* of c. 1120 not only celebrated the mechanical arts as instruments of human survival in this life and of redemption in the next, but also suggested that their practitioners were deserving of admiration in their own right:

Introduction: A is for artisan

9

nec sine causa proverbium sonat quod:

Ingeniosa fames omnes excuderit artes.

hac equidem ratione illa quae nunc excellentissima in studiis hominum vides, reperta sunt. hac eadem pingendi, texendi, sculpendi, fundendi, infinita genera exorta sunt, *ut iam cum natura ipsum miremur artificem*.

Nor is it without cause that the proverb says: “Ingenious want hath mothered all the arts.” Want it is which has devised all that you see most excellent in the occupations of men. From this the infinite varieties of painting, weaving, carving, and founding have arisen, so that *we look with wonder not at nature alone but at the artificer as well*.²⁴

Though medieval artificers are no longer directly available to our admiring gaze, we certainly have continued to this day to “look with wonder” at the mundane and magnificent products of their skill – the many books and buildings, paintings and sculptures, and articles of furniture, clothing and jewelry still extant today. These tangible traces of artisanal practice, all unfortunately largely beyond the scope of this book, tell yet another story of craft labor, as do artisans’ manuals and handbooks (most famously the *De diversis artibus* of the twelfth-century monk calling himself Theophilus Presbyter and the sketchbook of the thirteenth-century architect Villard de Honnecourt), which give us some insight into a wide range of historical craft techniques.²⁵ On the other hand, pictures of labor like those in the “trade” windows of Chartres cathedral and in the almost innumerable depictions of the building of the tower of Babel and Noah’s ark – images of craftsmen at their work that were once taken to be transparent, historically accurate depictions of labor and its technologies – are now understood to be representations inflected as much (or more) by the ideological investments of their patrons and by longstanding iconographic tradition as by their makers’ actual situations or attitudes.²⁶ In fact, aside from the much-discussed thematizing of craft labor and its products in the Corpus Christi cycles, the occasional artist’s self-portrait in paint or stone, and the English masons’ manuscripts I discuss in Chapter 2, the more technical texts are perhaps as close as we are ever likely to get to artisanal self-representation. For if there is one thing we most definitely know about the rank and file of medieval craftspeople, it is that they rarely told their own stories, at least not in any truly unmediated way.²⁷

At the same time, however, the act of drawing of connections between work and selfhood was a deeply ingrained part of medieval culture. Particularly after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which mandated annual confession for all believers, late medieval lay-folk were constantly exhorted

to acts of inward self-examination that included a review of their daily labors; even before 1215, however, preachers had begun to make use of *sermones ad status*, addressed to members of particular estates and professions, in order to instruct their flocks in ways that took account of their social situations and working lives.²⁸ But for the most part the injunction to scrutinize the self meant reflecting upon worldly occupation only insofar as the performance of that occupation was understood to have influence, for good or ill, upon the state of the soul and its capacity for further refinement (a metaphorically metallurgical process whose representation – and ontological as well as epistemological ramifications – I will discuss further in Chapters 2 and 3). But it is worth pointing out here that the pastoral call to look within has perhaps its most important source in 1 Corinthians 3, a passage to which I will return several times in this book. There instructing his flock that “*Dei aedificatio estis*” [you are God’s building], the apostle Paul assigns his readers the work that it is their task to continue:

Secundum gratiam Dei quae data est mihi ut sapiens architectus fundamentum posui alius autem superaedificat unusquisque autem videat quomodo superaedificet. Fundamentum enim aliud nemo potest ponere praeter id quod positum est qui est Christus Iesus. Si quis autem superaedificat supra fundamentum hoc aurum argentum lapides pretiosos ligna faenum stipulam: uniuscuiusque opus manifestum erit dies enim declarabit quia in igne revelabitur et uniuscuiusque opus quale sit ignis probabit.

According to the grace of God that is given to me, as a wise architect, I have laid the foundation; and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation no man can lay, but that which is laid; which is Christ Jesus. Now if any man build upon this foundation, gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble: Every man’s work shall be manifest; for the day of the Lord shall declare it, because it shall be revealed in fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work, of what sort it is. (1 Corinthians 3:10–13)

It is this passage, along with Christ’s Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:24–26), that helps to give the *Omne bonum*’s illuminated carpenter and his shaky home their exemplary power. As Mary Carruthers has argued, “the master builder trope for every sort of composition, including one’s own character, is basic in the Middle Ages”; as she shows, by the thirteenth century Paul’s words had become fundamental not only to spiritual thought and monastic meditative practice, but also to medieval poetics.²⁹ Thus where in the early twelfth century Hugh of St. Victor had instructed the student of Scripture that the sacred text was an “aedificio” [building] upon whose foundation the *reader* was “spirituale fabricaturus aedificum” [about to construct the spiritual building],³⁰ in the early thirteenth century