Introduction: Writing masculinity in the later Middle Ages

Ego certe, domine, laboro hic et laboro in me ipso. Factus sum mihi terra difficultatis et sudoris nimii.
(Augustine, *Confessions*, X, xvi, 25)[1]

A man in the house is worth two in the street.
(Mae West, *Belle of the Nineties*, 1934)

The frontispiece of this book shows a misericord depicting a master-craftsman, a wood-carver, working in his workshop with his three apprentices. The fact that he is represented with his apprentices identifies the subject as a householder at a time when apprentices would have lived in the house attached to the workshop where they were trained. The coincidence of medium and subject matter here – this is a wood-carving of a wood-carver carving – invests this with a subjectivity not found in those other misericords that depict, say, the labours of the agricultural year; it is, I shall argue, a piece of life writing or, rather, life carving. The initials of the maker – a 'W' and a 'V' – on either side of the central 'portrait' and arranged around the tools of his trade – the saw and gouge – are an embedded signature in what are more usually anonymous pieces. The very stuff of this carving, its material, writes it into the life of its maker. That is not to say, of course, that this carving is a window onto actual and everyday life, as earlier misericord scholars sometimes thought. It is evidently implicated in prevailing cultural ideologies about the authority of the male householder and master craftsman, a masculine model that is also prominent in the records of the urban guilds and the municipal authorities, which wished for a transparent, male-governed and

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household-based manufacturing sector.[2] Its representation of self should be treated as sceptically as any other first-person narrator from any other life-written text. While this piece, however, may say very little about the King's Lynn carver with the initials W. V., or even the daily grind of making misericords in the early fifteenth century, it does tell us about contemporary ideals of masculinity and how they operated.[3] Furthermore, there is a palpable and playful interaction between these ideals and a preoccupation with the self, wherein is found a representation of the subject. This volume will seek to explore similar intersections between medieval masculine subjectivity and the ethics of labour and living, within a group of texts that are geographically proximate and that span the two generations between *c.* 1360 and *c.* 1430: William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, Thomas Usk's *The Testament of Love*, John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (principally Book IV), Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* and *Tale*, and the poetry of Thomas Hoccleve.

Where the carver depicted on this misericord dominates and fills the workshop space, his apprentices are much smaller, in a neat illustration of the differential in their ages and their statuses within the workshop. Whilst two apprentices work together at a bench behind the master, the single figure on the right of the piece hesitates on the threshold of the room. It is significant that there are three apprentices rather than just one, signalling this master's moral fitness as an educator of the young and the manager of a business concern that was larger and more financially successful than was the average.[4] The size and centrality of the master-carver articulates his authority and proprietorial rights over the space, its personnel and the products of their labour. The positioning of the apprentice on the margins of the carving suggests his liminal status as a trainee, an adolescent, a temporary resident and also possibly an immigrant. The dog under the table signals that this is a domestic workshop attached to a household and provides an iconographic sign that this business and, by extension, the associated home are governed through unbreachable bonds of fidelity.

This is a bold and self-assertive piece of work; carving himself into his local church – St Nicholas's, King's Lynn – with a mark more memorable, although usually less permanent than the mason's, this maker proudly advertises and autographs his craft with a statement about his status as a householder, a 'good' man and a respected member of the community.[5] This carver has a confidence in his work that encourages him to inscribe his initials quite indelibly on the church furniture, rivalling the way that wealthy benefactors were writing theirs, alongside the

saints', in stained glass lights. Glass, however, was an expensive medium – most was imported from the continent through entry points like King's Lynn, and was then painted with costly pigment and fired in workshops like those which proliferated in East Anglia; in contrast wood was cheap and the price of the labour was the only real cost of a misericord.[6] Here we might see a connection with the literature of the same period that was exploiting English (another vernacular medium, like home-grown wood) and using it to create works which presumed to rival those in Latin and French, languages which, like Rhenish or French glass, had more cultural cachet. Even in these acts of self-assertion, however, in their overly earnest insistence on industry and competence, can be detected a vulnerability, an anxiety about the possible insufficiency of the masculine self being represented.

In just the same way that countless Middle English texts opened with an acknowledgement of the unexceptional nature, the deficiency of the language in which they were composed, wooden misericords have also been seen as a lowly medium. M. D. Anderson prefaces the most authoritative catalogue of English misericords like this:

Misericords are a very humble form of medieval art and it is unlikely that the most distinguished carvers of any period were employed in making them, except perhaps, during their apprentice years.[7]

There are all sorts of assumptions here about both misericords and apprentices; in a similar vein, Anderson suggests elsewhere that the creator of the pulpit in Ely Cathedral, being a man of evident taste, cannot also have been responsible for the misericords found in the same building, which he attributes, instead, to day-waged journeymen.[8] But of course misericords were – unlike pulpits and stained glass – out of sight, underneath seats, usually in the choir, and this position, coupled with their inexpensive medium, makes them 'humble'. However, it was precisely the cheapness of misericords and their location in the church that gave misericord-makers their licence; their decorative schemes were clearly less controlled from the top than those of the windows, or even of the more noticeable woodwork, in church buildings. If there ever were, for example, a window that showed a medieval glass painter, it has been destroyed – which is of course possible given the frustratingly breakable nature of the medium and people's propensity, especially in the middle of the seventeenth century, to throw stones. However, it is unlikely that such a reflexive figure would have been suggested or sanctioned by those that

paid for the glass. The subject matter of misericords was less consistently the insignia of important families, or religious iconography; often they showed carnivalesque, scurrilous and fantastic scenes or scenes of 'ordinary life' – indeed themes that were suitable to be sat on. The quirky repertoire of the misericord-maker includes representations of the non-aristocratic self, the self, unsuitable for stained glass, in his work-a-day, domestic setting. Misericords, then, are a kind of joke or graffiti. Missing the grandiloquence of stained glass they articulate a comic version of the self, which is even a parodic comment upon the vanity of the patrons depicted in church windows. Not just aspirational but also self-fashioning, the literature considered in this book also finds, in the mundane materials of vernacular English, scope to discuss a new kind of masculine selfhood that was constructed out of the quotidian language of labour and the bourgeois household.

Of course, it may be that Anderson is right and that misericords *were* apprentice pieces and part of a training process. Then, of course, the joke is even more pronounced since the trainee, however affectionately, depicts his master as a domestic tyrant – a caricature which may or may not have squared with his reputation within the community that used the church – and then the apprentice carver covers his transgressive impudence by showing himself small, insignificant, indistinguishable from his peers and, anyway, on the way out. The most central of the pair of apprentices on the left of the King's Lynn carving has had his head chipped off, but the one whose head is still intact has it turned to his friend, mouth open mid-sentence. Their gossip takes place behind their master's back and beyond his supervision. The apprentice carver thus represents himself in modest relation to and in awe of his master – his social and gender role model – but his humility is bafflingly close to impudence. The protagonists and narrators in the literary texts studied here are also consistently measured against intelligible models of appropriate masculine labour, whether feudal icons, like the arable agriculturalist (as in *Piers Plowman*) and the knight-errant (in Book IV of the *Confessio Amantis*), or more up-to-the-minute, urban identities, like the good apprentice (in *The Canon's Yeo-man's Prologue* and *Tale*) or the professional writer (in the writings of Usk and Hoccleve). Like the King's Lynn misericord these poetic works use labour to connect what they portray and how they are made. These texts hover between a corroboration of and a satire on models of masculine labour and they interpose the reflexive subject at the confluence of these two divergent dynamics. It is in this equivocal and metamorphic tone that the autobiographical subject is written.

These texts constitute a new kind of London life writing that is concerned to place the subjective self in relation to the contemporary ethics of masculine labour and living. This brings me onto the question of terminology that exercises the introduction of so many books about life writing in the past. In this book I use the terms 'life writing' mostly and 'autobiography' occasionally; I do so advisedly and in full knowledge of the discomfort that accompanies their deployment or rejection elsewhere.[9] I do this not in an effort to redefine the genre but because they are the best terms that we have to refer to the reflexive writing practices of the kind reviewed in this book. 'Life writing' is designed to be a broad term, broader than 'autobiography' and I use it here without apology. 'Autobiography' is more difficult but I use it in preference to the alternatives that have been suggested. I reject the phrase 'ego document' on the grounds of inelegance; James Olney's 'perigraphy' (writing around or about [the self]) is nicer than 'ego document' but not really better, being less current and familiar than 'life writing', which has been defined similarly.[10] Lawrence de Looze's 'pseudo-autobiography' is heedful of the particular textures of medieval life writing but assumes three things that are not part of the approach of this volume: first it suggests that the textual personae are definitely *not* avatars of their authors (which, while it may be true of the texts he investigates, is not quite the case with those I look at here); secondly it assumes that there is a 'true' kind of autobiography which produces an authentic representation of the authorial self; and thirdly it implies that within that 'true' autobiography the text's subjectivity is exclusively sited within the protagonist-narrator.[11]

The word autobiography, of course, comes from the Greek: *autos* (self), *bios* (life), *graphein* (to write). The problem comes in relation to the second of these. Although the life writing investigated here does discuss past events (*The Testament of Love* being a good example), I do not think that their authors are ever principally engaged in representing a historical life. These writings are less acts of memorialization or recollection than expressions of confession and conscience; I am concerned, then, more with the *autos* than the *bios*, which is where, I think, medieval life writing practices are more likely to direct us.[12] Further, a gendered study such as this one is also, inevitably perhaps, guided to consider the motifs and mechanics of confession, a narrative form that foregrounds the sexual life. Given the superfluity of the *bios*, then, the term 'autography' – which has been coined by H. Porter Abbot to discuss the reflexive fiction of Samuel Beckett – seems potentially useful.[13] There is a possible ambiguity, though, with using that term in a discussion of a manuscript culture

where (as in the case of Thomas Hoccleve, for example) the text may literally be in the author's own hand and so I have plumped for 'autobiography' to avoid such a confusion. 'Autobiography' as a genre has been strictly policed and has typically excluded life-written narratives that are chronologically idiosyncratic, often those from marginal or minority groups or from people in the past. The texts I look at here are evidently not 'autobiography' in the narrowest definition of that term, they are not written on a normative *Bildung* template, but they are certainly autobiographical in content and I intend the word in that limited sense. My principle interest, though, is not really to stretch a category but to find a practicable terminology to investigate the less pedantic question, similar to that raised by James S. Amelang's study of artisan autobiography in early modern Europe, of how people in the past wrote about themselves.[14]

Many medievalists, like de Looze, have been circumspect about using the word 'autobiography' because of the legacy of Jakob Burkhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*.[15] Others though, like Jeremy Tambling, have made short work of rejecting Burkhardt's thesis about the 'discovery of the individual' in the Renaissance period:

there is no ahistorical 'individualism' or 'humanity' to be discovered; for each age and dominant ideology will seek to produce the concept of the individual it wants – in relation to power structures, patriarchy and modes of control.[16]

There is, however, still some more work to be done: the modern studies of masculinity, which have recently been written to compliment women's studies and complete the picture of gender in the past, are very much entangled in this old debate about selfhood and modernity. 'Anxiety' has been the watchword in men's studies, and attempts to historicize the Freudian notion of anxiety have revisited Burkhardt and also Max Weber, whose *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* has also played its part in constructing the alterity of the Middle Ages.[17] Studies of masculinity, in fact, often recycle previous, implicitly phallocentric theses – like those of Burkhardt and Weber – and, by making them overtly about men, have produced new accounts of *modern* masculinity as desiring, anxious and subjective.[18] This strategy has the unfortunate effect of describing the Middle Ages as one which antedates the developments that 'seem particularly important for the making of those configurations of social practice that we now call "masculinity"', consigning medieval men to a kind of Kleinian infancy in which they are unable to delimit themselves from object others.[19] I am not, in contrast, arguing for any kind of sameness

between the medieval and modern periods; masculinity isn't timeless. Rather, in a move somewhat like Tambling's cited above, I argue that pre-Reformation masculine anxiety should be acknowledged and analysed, and its many differences from the cultural angst in other periods should be discovered through a close reading of its particular textures and manifestations. Whilst this volume does not attempt a comparison of the periods either side of the Reformation crisis, such a study would be a valuable area for further research and would find, I should imagine – perhaps a little like Christine Peters's recent work on women's lay piety – the difference in the detail, in the local variations that are typically written out of the neo-Weberian metanarrative.[20] This volume instead focuses on the textual community of late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century London, describing and contextualizing a particular fashion for positioning the medieval, but nonetheless *anxious* masculine self at the interstices between his labour and his domestic life.

Elizabeth Heale's recent consideration of the self in Renaissance verse has laudably attempted to outline in its introduction, in a more sensitive and less simplistic way, exactly what are the differences and indeed continuities between the medieval and Renaissance representations of selfhood.[21] Finally, though, I don't think that Heale's conclusion, that medieval life writing finds 'closure and identity in the authorizing discourses of God conveyed through the authoritative words of Reason', which is predicated on the study of Hoccleve as the sole representative of his age, is a convincing reading either of Hoccleve's neurotic verse forms or of medieval religious and life writing practices more broadly. It is all too often fallaciously assumed that medieval religiosity contrasts with Renaissance secularism and, further, that faith precludes cerebral inwardness.[22] Faith purports to be, but is really not at all, an emptying of the self. The same is true of social and political conformity. Exterior bodies (God, political and social communities) turn out, after all, to be subjectively imagined, a part of, rather than either a foil to, or a substitute for the interiorized subject. The 'self-fashioning' subject in these texts is to be found in the homosocial and internal negotiations between the self and the world.[23] I do not seek necessarily to identify the authors of these texts unequivocally and exclusively with the narrators inside their writings, even where those narrators share their names and, perhaps, their occupations.[24] It is not clear, when we look at the King's Lynn misericord, whether the maker is a master or an apprentice; the carving is clearly concerned to show not the self in an isolated portrait but as part of a masculine community; its subjectivity is dialectic, confected in the

spaces between one individual and another, or between the individual as
is and what he imagines he *ought* to be.

Although scholars often look for selfhood and individuality in sub-
version and iconoclasm, I am at least as interested in the way in which the
texts or narrators discussed in this book conspire with and invest in
dominant ideologies. Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman, for example, has been
described as a symbol of insurrection, but I argue in chapter four that his
account of himself is just as telling about the dangers of trade complicity
and male confederacy, about misplaced allegiance and inappropriate
labour cohesion.[25] Will, in *Piers Plowman*, has also been seen as a
maverick narrator and yet the poem's subjectivity, I suggest in chapter
one, is not solely and exclusively located in the narrator but rather in the
relationship between the narrator and those masculine models – labour
models primarily – that he is exhorted to emulate by his conservative but,
crucially, interior interlocutors.[26] Obedience and faith are often gla-
morized in these texts as active strengths and iconic masculinity is
deployed to that end. Karl Weintraub has argued, specifically about pre-
modern identity, that:

The more the mind's eye is fascinated by the ideal model before it, the more a
man will strive to attain *it*, the less he will ask about the fit between the model
and his own specific reality. He is unlikely to suffer from a sense of 'falsifying
himself' by fitting into the norms demanded by his model, to feel 'hemmed in' if
the ideal expresses the values of the society, or to lament the lost opportunities of
his precious individuality.[27]

I could not disagree more strongly. It is precisely in the absence of a 'fit'
between iconic masculine models and the self that the subjective anxieties
I describe in this book are to be found. It is exactly what happens in this
gap that is dramatized in the texts here. I consider the autobiographical
motive, the subjectivity of the text, as it is constructed on the fraught
interface between the narrator-protagonist and his various interlocutors
over appropriate forms of masculine conduct.[28] These dialogues, I sug-
gest, exteriorize the formation of the social conscience, staging the uneasy
concessions and accommodations necessary for the individual to find a
place in his world. In thinking about conscience I do not describe an
innate rational consciousness *per se*, rather I use it as a conceptual tool
with which to historicize an anxiety produced between the twin fears of
being, on the one hand, overly appetitive and ostracized and, on the
other, unassertive and exploited.[29] Because every community differs from
every other and places uneven expectations upon its members, I do not

present evidence for an ontological and historically transcendent set of human anxieties. Rather I describe singular and culturally specific patterns in the connections between these texts and their contexts, between their narrators and their authors' *milieux*, between their protagonists and the ethical expectations against which they are measured.

That these texts share an interest in, indeed a fixation on, work – which is not always thought to be a very poetical subject – is no coincidence. Indeed, they are evidence of a larger cultural perturbation about a contemporary labour crisis – which was itself a corollary of the demographic crises of the previous decades – a crisis that is exhibited in the labour legislation repeatedly reissued throughout the latter half of the fourteenth century. This legislation was part of a discourse that, although it purported to be retrospective, fabricated a new labour ethic that combined antiquated feudal values and their concomitant, reliable gender-paradigms with a regulatory framework for the burgeoning wage economy. Further, the national labour legislation was modelled upon *a priori* London law, a fact that indicates the precociousness and particularity of the metropolis during this period of economic and social transformation.[30] In particular, London was singular in terms of its reception of a significant number of economic migrants, especially from those places where the land was of indifferent fertility.[31] Many of those migrants were young people who came in search of household service jobs in the town. These migrations placed in tension notions of belonging and enterprise, social investedness and economic opportunism.

The London literature considered in this book is thought to originate from a circle that was curiously positioned in relation to the discursive preoccupation with labour and the ideals of industry that it generated.[32] First, these authors are often thought to have been close to, indeed implicated in, the administrative culture within which the labour legislation was made and disseminated; it is thought that Chaucer in particular had a hand in its enforcement.[33] Whatever the truth about their authors, the narrators of these texts embody a dilemma about the relationship between work and male desire, between working and domestic identities, that were in antagonized conflict in the lives of the late-medieval bureaucrats. As secular men in clerical roles, and frequently *clerici uxorati*, the bureaucrats occupied an unstable cusp identity untested in social practice.[34] The late fourteenth-century labour crisis precipitated a revival of and a restless insistence upon various conservative models of holistic social corporation – such as the ubiquitous three estates schema – within which the bureaucrat found it hard to classify himself.

Whilst his labour identity seemed to position him within the first estate, his marital or sexual status aligned him with the second or third. The late-medieval process of generating ethical codes for these relatively untried male lifestyles, which I have elsewhere described as a cultural rite of passage, is represented in the interior negotiations of a new kind of vernacular male life writing.[35]

The alienation produced by this disjunction between working and sexual status was exacerbated by fashionable moral discourses that continually related men's sexual and labouring roles, making industry and the social cohesion it would necessarily produce an attractive masculine commission by linking it to sexual success and patriarchal authority. The conceptual and lexical conflation of work and sex, of production and reproduction, was not new in this period: the Middle Ages inherited it from both classical and Judeo-Christian traditions. Aristotelian medicine, for example, used metaphors of arable husbandry to describe the processes of human fertility (men were figured as agriculturalists, women as passive fields and children as harvested fruit).[36] Production and reproduction were also the activities of the fallen human, labouring for food and in childbirth. Gregory Sadlek has traced other traditions, from Ovid's *Ars amatoria*, for example, showing how labour imagery supplied polite euphemisms for Alan of Lille's rejection of sodomy and the recommendation of reproductive sex in his influential *De planctu naturae*.[37] These were indeed old tropes but they were revised and given new meanings in the particular social and economic climate of post-Black Death England. For example, whilst the legislative energies of this generation were fixated on the production and enforcement of labour law, private households increasingly became the site where social and sexual behaviours were policed and managed.[38] The task of instilling discipline in the youthful and often transient population of the urban household was being delegated to male householders and the instruments that were supplied for the task were often regulations surrounding trade, employment and training. This tendency to regulate labour and social/sexual behaviours together was matched by the physical proximity of working and living in the ideal dual urban household, with its annexed workshop or shop. Indeed, the urban guilds and municipal authorities, in a systematic process of 'cognitive purification', encouraged householding men to demonstrate their authority through the regulation of their dependent wives, children, servants and apprentices – to conflate their working and their domestic identities.[39] Like the carver portrayed on the King's Lynn misericord, though, this was an ideal that was rarely realized in practice,