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978-0-521-03527-9 - Courtly Letters in the Age of Henry VIII: Literary Culture and the Arts of Deceit

Seth Lerer

Excerpt

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1 Pretexts: Chaucer's Pandarus and the origins of courtly discourse

Think of it as a book of lies. The courtly life had always been a show, and the literature of courtliness has always been appreciated for its arabesques of the deceitful.¹ Years before Machiavelli and Castiglione had captured the courtier's ruses in maximal form, and decades before their work had been translated into English, Henry VIII's ambassadors and poets were displaying that rich blend of sycophancy and sincerity that would mark the sprezzaturas of the sixteenth century.² In the first year of the young King's reign, Luiz Carroz, Ferdinand of Spain's ambassador to England, wrote that the experience of service forced him to dissimulate.³ By the end of Henry's first decade, poets such as Stephen Hawes and John Skelton could critically reflect on the cloakings and collusions of royal service.⁴ Thomas More lived among the "stage plays of the great,"⁵ and Erasmus recognized that the courtier must live behind the masks of theater.⁶ Such masking, as Erasmus and his peers well knew, involved not just the assumption of a voice but the transvestings of the body. The courtier becomes a creature of the *corpus*, whether it be as groom to a king, ministering to royal micturations, or as a performing self, garbed in the texts and textiles of the poet. The instabilities of courtly bodies extend to the very gender of courtiership itself. The courtier is both a pimp and prostitute: a panderer to the desires of the prince, a procurer of women, information, and advantage; but also a servant, whose needs have all the willful manipulations of the whore. As Erasmus put it, "Always be complaining and demanding, and just as skillful courtesans by various pretexts and devices always get something from their lovers, similarly let it be your endeavour always to get something from your prince."⁷

What are the sources of this life? Ovidian erotics, Ciceronian friendship, Arthurian romance, clerical pedagogy, curial service – all have been invoked as providing both the words and deeds of courtly culture. And certainly, the courtier and poet, the lover and the diplomat, have long been understood as two sides of their respective courtly coins. The currency of courtiership has been sought in those texts that meld the two:

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treatises on the art of rhetoric that, for example, yoke together literary and political service as forms of verbal feigning; or manuals on the art of love that illustrate how the cajoleries of public *amicitia* can be transformed into the wiles of private *amor*.⁸ The very terms of courtly service owe their origin to this complex of the rhetorical, the amorous, the literary, and the social. Words such as *elegantia*, *decorum*, *disciplina*, *curialitas*, *honestas*, and their many vernacular equivalents, signaled not just codes of conduct but ways of speaking and, too, ways of reading.⁹ The very notion of performance itself, moreover, embraced all aspects of the self on judged display, whether it be in court, in school, or in the bedroom.

Among works of English literature that explored this blend of love and politics, few texts have stood out as clearly as Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. From its first circulation among the poet's contemporaries, through its later manuscript transmissions and reception in the printed book, the poem compelled the imagination of male love, female betrayal, power politics, and authorial responsibility.¹⁰ Though indebted for his plot and characters to Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, Chaucer transformed his source through the addition of a rich Boethian philosophical texture, a uniquely English lyric sensibility, and a distinctively personal sense – born, perhaps, of years of public service – of the manipulations of the courtly life.¹¹ So deep was the current of courtiership in the poem, that its titular characters quickly became models for aristocratic as well as newly-emergent bourgeois lovers. Throughout the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, the poem functioned as a textbook for the amateur and courtly maker, “the great poem,” in John Stevens's words, “in which he could study and find how ‘most felyngly’ to speak of love.”¹² Chaucer's *Troilus* was the major source of what Richard Firth Green has called the “social and literary plunder” out of which late medieval literature was made.¹³ By the early Tudor period, the social habits of reading and reciting the poem may have generated an entire “public world of courtly love,” in Raymond Southall's words, a world of “love, secrecy and steadfastness” that informed the register of literariness at Henry VIII's court.¹⁴ For Thomas Elyot's aspiring royal servant, in the passage from *Pasquil the Playne* that I have quoted as the epigraph to this book, *Troilus and Criseyde* may be carried along with the New Testament as nothing less than the bible of courtiership.

For Elyot's courtier (as well as those described by Skelton and Hawes at the beginning of the Henrician era to Wyatt and Surrey at its close) it is not, however, *Troilus and Criseyde* who are the models for that public world of courtly love, but rather it is Pandarus. Though his name would provide the eponym for one of the most damning terms in the English

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vocabulary of desire, his presence has largely been slighted by modern critics in favor of his amatory pupils.¹⁵ Yet there is much throughout the fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries to evidence the impact of his distinctive blend of advisory tuition and transgressive voyeurism. In manuscript excerpts and Chaucerian imitations, he appears as a model of advisory friendship and political sagacity.¹⁶ He is here, as Gervase Matthew has argued that he was for Chaucer's Ricardian audience, "a man of cultivated sensibility, facilely expressed emotions and quick stratagems."¹⁷ But he is also a creature of voyeurism and surreptitiousness, an entrepreneur of the erotic, spying on Troilus and Criseyde in bed, transmitting private missives, and misreading and misrepresenting female motives and his own desires. It is this "privy" Pandarus that defines courtly poetics for the Henrician age and, more generally, that shapes the making of the early modern reader. His presence in the sixteenth century – especially after the printing of the *Troilus* by Wynkyn de Worde in 1517 and its appearance as part of the larger Chaucerian editions of Richard Pynson (1526) and William Thynne (1532) – would have addressed directly the concerns of courtiers and gentry during the reign of Henry VIII: anxieties about the interception of political and amatory letters; about the relationships between the visualization of the body and the proper codes of physical desire; about the choices offered between personal friendship and public service. Pandarus, I propose, stands at that "nexus of power, sexuality, and inwardness" that has been seen, at least since Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, as the defining condition of literary culture in the early Tudor period.¹⁸

This is a book about the making of what I call the Pandaric life, a book about the practices of love and politics as shaped by literary figures and, in turn, about the reading of canonical poetic texts through transgressive personal responses. It is in part, therefore, about publicity: about the makings of courtly personae, about performances of love, diplomacy, and power. But it also seeks the origins of privacy: the intimacies of the letter, the arts of secret reading, the confines of the study. In the correspondence of ambassadors, the love letters of King Henry, the commonplace books of metropolitan and provincial gentry, the courtly poetry of Wyatt and his circle, and the publications of the printshop, lie the ministrations of the voyeur and the surreptitions of the surveyed. The men and women I present here read past the public discourses of power that, in early Tudor culture in particular, set the terms of institutional behavior that have long been understood as hallmarks of the modern. They locate cultural self-knowing in the rituals of theater and the impulses of spectatorship. They focus on the presentations of the body and the stories of its maintenance, display, or pain.

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They are creatures of the politics of ocular desire – a desire that, whether it be set before the eyes of early Tudor readers or the modern academic critic, leads us almost inextricably into Pandarus's closet.

While much has recently been made of Chaucerian reception in the formation of English literary history, and while much, too, has been done with courtly theatrics in the construction of the modern self, the nexus of the two has never fully been explored.¹⁹ Indeed, the literary culture of the early Tudor period itself has only recently emerged as an object of study in its own right. Traditional literary history sees it as a curious interlude between the dullness of the fifteenth century and the efflorescence of the Elizabethan age. For C. S. Lewis, H. A. Mason, and John Stevens, all writing over thirty years ago, the early Tudor period was a world of pastime with good company, of stable male and female gender roles, of amorous dalliance, lyric performance, and witty exchange.²⁰ Much has been done, of course, to dismantle such a fantasy, especially by the New Historicist inquiries into the social politics of the early sixteenth century.²¹ So, too, the literary genealogies established by the period's first chroniclers and critics (for example, the printer Richard Tottel and the theorist George Puttenham) have been challenged.²² The defining dyad of courtly poetry has been reengineered not as that of Wyatt and Surrey but of Hawes and Skelton.²³ Texts that have long been dismissed as derivative (Hawes's *Conforte of Louers*), unreadable (the Latin panegyrics of Bernard André), obscurely topical (the documents of the Grammarians' War), or theatrically self-promoting (Skelton's *Garlande of Laurell*) are coming to be seen as central to the consciousness of English writers and readers during the first third of the sixteenth century.²⁴ The transition from script to print – long understood as a phenomenon both quick and irreversible, with short-term pain and long-term benefit – has, too, been reassessed as far more complicated and dilated than theorists such as Marshall McLuhan and historians such as Elizabeth Eisenstein would have one believe.²⁵ And the ideals of friendship and learning once unequivocally praised as the source of Western humanism – as articulated in the work of More, Erasmus, and others – have been shaded (if not shadowed) by the critical revisionism that sees an erotics to the pedagogical and that knows well the blurred line between *amor* and *amicitia* in the discourses of the letter.²⁶

Though this book is indebted to this sway in recent criticism, it does not unequivocally seek to dismiss the researches of the past nor to support unswervingly the claims of current scholarship. Instead, it seeks to interrogate the cultural conditions that produced and read the literature of early Tudor England as well as the critical presuppositions that have rephrased the approaches to the period during the past two

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decades. This book, therefore, takes issue with a number of contemporary claims, most notably, in chapters 2 and 3, the preoccupation with the homosocial cast to Henry VIII's servants and savants.²⁷ At the same time, it seeks to assess anew the problems posed by more traditional scholarly methods, in particular, in chapters 4 and 5, the techniques of textual criticism as they have been used to edit and attribute certain poems, manuscripts, and early printed volumes of the early sixteenth century.²⁸ As in my previous book, *Chaucer and His Readers*, my overarching goal is to restore the material text to primacy in literary study, whether that text be a canonical work of literature, such as *Troilus and Criseyde*, or such ephemera as the verse of a provincial manuscript compiler or the elusive missives of a royal ambassador. This is a book about the making of social identity through the history of reading: one that seeks to understand relationships between the public and the private, the oral and the written, the scripted and the printed, the courtly and the provincial, the educated and the popular. This may seem a tall order for a study centered on a few "major" and quite a few "minor" texts. And yet, it is precisely this relationship between the major and the minor, so ensconced in modern literary histories, that I seek to dismantle. The literature of early Tudor England is read and written in the margins of its manuscripts, the little quartos of its printers, the commonplace books of its men and women.

If the literary history of early Tudor England has languished on the byways of the non-canonical, its social and political historiography has not. For many decades, the reigns of the Henries have been central to accounts of the formation of the English nation state and its defining institutions. The patterns of legal judgment, the stratagems of statecraft, the creations of bureaucracy, the formations of political charisma – all have been located in their modern form during the early Tudor period. The history of political institutions such as the Privy Chamber has been traced by David Starkey as a phenomenon keyed to the English monarchs' personalities, as well as to the paradigms of service, class, and the acquisition of wealth in Britain.²⁹ Starkey's work is of immense importance, not just for its charting of the changes in a particular political institution, but for its implications concerning the ideas of intimacy and publicity in the period. In a sense, Starkey's is what we might now call of a history of the body: in Michel Foucault's terms, a reading of the royal body as the locus of force relations, where the King's corporeal form is the site of national identity formation, diplomatic intrigue, and public spectacle.³⁰ Henry VIII's body is, in many ways, the emblem of the Tudor body politic, a claim brought out with much subtlety by Louis Montrose in his account of Renaissance subjectivity

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and subjection.³¹ Starkey's work has thus had great impact on the New Historicist assessment of the formation of courtliness. It stands behind many of the opening gestures of Jonathan Goldberg's *Sodometries* and its functions, in effect, as the large historical subtext of his study of writing and power in the sixteenth century, *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the Renaissance*.³²

In addition to Starkey, one of the most influential political historians of this period is G. R. Elton, who has set forth an interpretation of the origins of Tudor constitutionality.³³ Elton argued that it was Thomas Cromwell who took the opportunity provided by the King's marital difficulties to redefine the nature of the English nation state. It was Cromwell, in Elton's reading, who renamed England as an empire, recalibrated the kingship as a constitutional monarchy ruling through bureaucratic institutions, codified and nationalized local legal customs, and galvanized Parliament into a statute-making body of government. Elton's thesis has been stated and restated many times since its presentation in *The Tudor Revolution in Government* over forty years ago.³⁴ Here is one succinct version of it: "By using statute – law made by parliament – to solve a variety of complicated legal and constitutional problems, and by exploiting the powers devolved upon him by the monarch, Cromwell was able to shift the burden of government from the personal servants of the royal household to properly organized departments of state."³⁵ Elton's work has many ramifications, and I cannot deal with all of them here. But I have singled out this particular aspect of his thesis because I think it central to this book's inquiries into the tensions between private counsel and public law in the makings of kingly power, literary taste, and courtly poetry and theater. In his later study *Policy and Police*, on which I will draw heavily, Elton limns the contours of a culture of surreptitiousness and inspection that defined the enforcement of the Cromwellian "revolution" of the 1530s.³⁶ The interception of letters, the taking of statements, the encouragement of informancy, the need for concealment – all are political issues that have an impact on the formation of literary subjectivity in the age of Wyatt.

Words such as "literature" and "politics," therefore, are not terms of a unique or identifiable valence, where one takes precedence over the other.³⁷ Instead, I posit, both emerge together from the cultural reception of certain texts and the social practices of certain groups. I argue here that Chaucer's Pandarus stands at the nexus of those texts and practices. He is the generative figure of the early Tudor age, embodying the complicated and ultimately self-baffled artfulness of courtly life³⁸ – what I have called the Pandaric life. In order to appreciate the texture of that life, one needs to understand the many discourses of Chaucer's poem, the

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Pretexts: Chaucer's Pandarus

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history of letter-writing and the rise of silent reading, and the habits of corporeal display that shape the idioms of early sixteenth-century English literary culture. The following sections of this chapter take up these strands to sketch the pretexts of Henrician experience and my own inquiries into its forms.

The love of letters

At the heart of the Pandaric are the fabrications of the letter.³⁹ Scarcely has he intruded into Troilus's bedchamber – entering in “unwar” (*Troilus and Criseyde*, I.549) and deferring for nearly fifty lines his self-announcement, “it am I, Pandare” (I.588) – than he defines his counselorship of Troilus through his privy insight into Oenone's letter to Paris. “Yee say [i.e., saw] the lettre that she wrot, I gesse?” (I.656) Pandarus inquires of his friend. But how could he, or for that matter, how could Pandarus? Unlike Ovid's original, with its complaints of the young rustic girl to the imperial Paris, Pandarus quotes only her complaint that lovers cannot heal themselves. His reading of the letter, furthermore, is pressed into the service not of understanding female pain but of articulating his own status as a lover. “Right so fare I, unhappyly for me” (I.666), he avers in a curiously confused identification with the spurned girl. “And yet,” he goes on, “kan I reden [i.e., advise] the / And nat myself” (668–69). This is the heart of the Pandaric dilemma. Privileged with information garnered from a private missive, he is nonetheless incapable of learning from his reading. Capable of ventriloquizing the female epistolary voice, he fails to understand the nature of female desire. And, while his store of information and proverbial lore grants him the expertise to counsel Troilus, he is still incapable of counseling himself.

When Pandarus becomes a teacher of the art of letter writing, these paradoxes are exposed for what they are: the machinations of the voyeur. In Book II, his amatory tuition of Troilus depends not just on his full command of all the strategies of *dictamen*, but on skills at subtly insinuating himself into the epistolary process.⁴⁰ Pandarus is a reader over Troilus's shoulder, a friend who watches Troilus write, fold, and seal his letter, only to have it delivered into his own hands for eventual submission to Criseyde. And when this letter reaches its addressee, it again becomes the focus of a voyeuristic reading: a text now not to be perused in private, but intruded upon by reader and messenger. This is, now, a distinctively Pandaric moment, rich with all the secretive manipulations that distinguish Chaucer's handling of the story from Boccaccio's. Pandarus draws Criseyde away from her companions with a story about Greek spies. He leads her “Into the gardyn” so that she may hear

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“Al pryvely” of these events (II.1114–15). But, of course, this tale of espionage is a ruse designed to get himself and Criseyde out of public earshot (II.1118–19) so that he may read her Troilus’s epistle. This is an episode not of the formal manuals of love but of the stark transgressions of propriety. It is a moment of deep surreptition and barely suppressed violence – an episode in which Criseyde reacts with anger to her uncle’s suggestion that she reply (“Scrit ne bille [i.e., write no letter], / For love of God” [II.1130–31]), and he with indignation at the thought that he would harm her:

To dethe mot I smyten be with thondre,
 If for the citee which that stondeth yondre,
 Wolde I a lettre unto yow brynge or take
 To harm of yow! (II.1145–48)

The violence that surrounds the letter here climaxes not with thunder claps or civic acts, but with Pandarus’s own physically threatening retort and fear of being seen.

“Refuse it naught,” quod he, and *hente* hire faste, “grabbed”
 And in hire bosom the lettre down he thraste,
 And seyde hire, “Now cast it away anon,
 That folk may seen and *gauren* on us tweye.” (II.1154–58) “stare”

This is a letter that can only be opened alone, in Criseyde’s “chambre” where she goes “Ful pryvely this lettre for to rede” (II.1173, 1176); a letter whose reception generates a playful game of withdrawal and surprise between Criseyde and Pandarus (“But Pandarus, that in a studye stood, / Er he was war, she took hym by the hood, / And seyde, ‘ye were caught er that ye wiste’” [II.1180–82]); a letter whose reply demands a level of enchainment that borders – at least rhetorically – on imprisonment:

And into a *closet*, for t’*avise* hire bettre,
 She wente *allone*, and gan hire herte *unfette*
 Out of desdaynes *prisoun* but a lite,
 And sette hire down, and gan a lettre write,
 Of which to telle in short is myn *entente*
Th’effect, as fer as I kan *understonde*. (II.1215–20, emphases mine)

These lines move pointedly from Criseyde’s self-absorption to the narrator’s disclosure. They point up with arresting power the shame of Criseydean privacy, a privacy that makes us all eavesdroppers: Pandarus himself, who just three stanzas earlier had promised to sew up and fold the document (II.1204); the narrator, who describes what it contains; and

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Chaucer's audience. This is a letter treated far differently from Troilus's. There, it was the writer himself who had folded it and sealed it with his own signet (II.1085–90). Here, all Criseyde does is “shette” (i.e., close) it (II.1226), leaving it for Pandarus to seal it up. There, for Troilus, the narrator had, in effect, paraphrased directly the content of the letter. Three stanzas narrate its progressions (II.1065–86) – a virtual transcription in indirect discourse – while Criseyde's gets only four lines (II.1221–25). And there is, too, a certain narratorial anxiety about this reportage. “Entente,” “effect,” “understonde” – these are the terms deployed throughout the poem to signal the surreptitiously observed or the illicitly discerned. Certainly, we have no knowledge, direct or indirect, of just what Criseyde's letter offers; nor do we have any evidence for how it would affect Troilus.

For when it reaches its intended, it does not do so in privacy. Pandarus is there to deliver it (II.1318), to hand Troilus a light (II.1320), and – we must assume – to look over his shoulder while he reads it himself. And Chaucer's narrator is there too, appealing to publicly shared observation in an odd blend of the commonplace and the erotic:

But as we may alday oureselven see,
 Thorough more wode or col, the more fir,
 Right so encrease hope, of what it be,
 Therwith ful ofte encresseth ek desir;
 Or as an *oak* comth of a litil spir, “oak”
 So thorough this lettre which that she hym sente
 Encrescen gan desir, of which he *brente*. (II.1331–37) “burned”

This is a curiously phallic moment for the poem. Troilus's hope and desire increase (the word shows up three times in the stanza) as an oak grows from a little sprout – a potentially disturbing application of an old saw to a new feeling. And Pandarus is there. His name intrudes again and again into Troilus's epistolary responses:

Wherfore I seye alwey, that day and nyght
 This Troilus gan to desiren moore
 Thanne he did erst, thorough hope, and did his myght
 To preessen on, as by Pandarus loore,
 And writen to hire of his sorwes soore.
 Fro day to day he leet it nought *refreyde*, “grow cold”
 That by Pandare he wroot somewhat or seyde; (II.1338–44)

And later on: “But to Pandare alwey was his recours” (II.1352). Pandarus has intruded, now, into the writing, reading, and transmission of the letters. He is, in effect, more than just postman or good friend; he is the tutor, reader, sealer, and inspirer of writing. He insinuates himself

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into the “verray hertes privetee” of Troilus, as he asks his friend whom he may trust to set up a liaison. “Now lat m’alone, and werken as I may” (II.1397, 1401).

I have reviewed this episode in *Troilus and Criseyde* in detail because it stands as something of the *Urtext* of Pandaric epistolary voyeurism at work in the early Tudor court. While the explicit transcript of the lovers’ letters in Book V of Chaucer’s poem may have had a greater impact on the amorous impersonations of the courtly lover,⁴¹ it is this passage that speaks directly to the anxiousness of Henrician courtier intrusion and, in turn, to the kinds of surreptitious transcriptions and readings that distinguish commonplace book compilation in the first third of the sixteenth century. Book II dramatizes tensions between the public and the private in epistolary terms, marking in particular the different ways in which a man and woman read and write.⁴² It also sets out the theatrics of Pandaric intrusion, offering in its figure of the go-between someone whose bold entries and lively intrusions sketch out the performative gestures of male friendship. In its broad contours and its local details, Book II of *Troilus* surfaces again and again in the early Tudor discourses of love and politics: in the pandarisms of King Henry’s minions; in the manuscript assemblies of the gentry; in the Satires of Wyatt; and in the reflections on the amorous epistle that fill Tottel’s *Miscellany*. Book II is thus a major “pretext” for my study, not just as a source of diction, but as structural paradigm for the defining dramas of intrusion and performance, letter-writing and illicit reading, in early Tudor courtly literature.

If letters are the lure of love, however, they are also the currency of politics. The medieval traditions of the *ars dictaminis* and the notarial development of formal correspondence generated a diplomacy that worked through letters.⁴³ The chancelleries of royal court or papal office developed the styles of epistolary negotiation, and throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, manuals of *dictamen* proliferated, much like instructions in the art of rhetoric or guides to love. Perhaps the most complete, and yet distinctive, of such manuals is Erasmus’s *De conscribendis epistolis*. Composed over a period of decades, from his first visits to England at the close of the 1490s to his return to the Low Countries in the early 1520s, his manual not only codifies the traditions of Ciceronian and notarial letter-writing; it also constitutes a topical critique of the manipulations of the courtly letter and, in turn, of the role of epistolography in the makings of human friendship and desire.⁴⁴ Historically, it exemplifies the ways in which, in John Najemy’s words, “the easy confidence with which some mid fifteenth-century humanists had defined the letter form and established rules for its use had dissolved in considerable uncertainty and even confusion.”⁴⁵ For me, it marks a