

The rhetoric of the royal chamber in late medieval London, York and Coventry

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ABSTRACT: In the late medieval period several English cities claimed the distinction of being a royal chamber: London and York referred to themselves as the 'king's chamber', whilst Coventry called itself the 'prince's chamber'. Examining the meaning of the metaphor of the chamber, this article provides a new perspective on the way in which cities negotiated their relations with the crown and shows how the chamber became an important aspect of corporate urban identity from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries.

In recent years several historians of late medieval English politics, concerned that the subject has lost its 'conceptual edge', have shown increasing interest in exploring the contemporary language of politics so as to gain a greater understanding of 'the values, ideals and conventions governing political life'.¹ Contemporary political ideals and contemporary use of language have been seen as worthy of attention because they constituted the 'political culture' in which political figures had to operate.² Serious doubts, though, have been cast upon the existence of a *single* political culture in late medieval England. It has been argued that 'fifteenth-century England did not operate as a political unit but as a series of political contexts, each with its own problems and rules'. These four arenas of politics, it has been suggested, were landed politics, court politics, the politics of government and popular politics.³ It is important, however, to ask – and it is a question that political historians of late medieval England, with their overriding interest in landed society, have

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¹ C. Carpenter, 'Political and constitutional history: before and after McFarlane', in R.H. Britnell and A.J. Pollard (eds), *The McFarlane Legacy: Studies in Late Medieval Politics and Society* (Stroud, 1995), 195, and E. Powell, 'After "After McFarlane": the poverty of patronage and the case for constitutional history', in D.J. Clayton *et al.* (eds), *Trade, Devotion and Governance: Papers in Later Medieval History* (Stroud, 1994), 10. See also the comments of J. Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship* (Cambridge, 1996), 1–9.

² Powell, 'After "After McFarlane"', 11.

³ G.L. Harriss, 'The dimensions of politics', in Britnell and Pollard, *McFarlane Legacy*, 1–20. The quotation is from p. 16.

not considered sufficiently – where towns fit into this fractured polity. In particular, if one of the keys to understanding ‘how society and politics actually worked’ lies in the interaction of local and national politics,⁴ it is also worth examining the extent to which the relationship between urban communities and the crown occupied a fifth political arena, with a separate language, agenda and tensions. This article identifies a neglected element in the political discourse of late medieval England: the rhetoric of crown-town relations, in particular that based upon the metaphor of the royal chamber.

Although London’s claims to be the ‘king’s chamber’ have received some attention from historians, few have done more than refer to them in passing.⁵ This article will examine first the emergence of the metaphor of the chamber in the early fourteenth century and the way in which the idea of London as the ‘king’s chamber’ was embellished in the reign of Richard II, before considering the aspirations of other cities to assume a similar distinction. In the late fourteenth century the city of York asserted its claim to be the ‘king’s chamber’ in direct imitation of London, whilst in the second half of the fifteenth century Coventry began to present itself, on the occasion of royal visits to the city, as the ‘prince’s chamber’. This article will show how the chamber was a powerful metaphor which London, York and Coventry appropriated to articulate and re-negotiate their relations with the crown at times of acute political tension. Significantly, their status as royal chambers was not formalized in any institutional sense and the metaphor was not sustained. If the metaphor was important in allowing a city to gain the attention, or declare its support, of the royal government, one of the interesting questions, then, is why the chamber remained an occasional rhetorical device to which London, York and Coventry had recourse only at certain critical moments.

Another issue is whether the chamber can provide a conceptual framework in which relations between urban communities and the crown in late medieval England might be located. It has been argued that, in the case of London, the city’s relationship with the royal government was based essentially on the interplay of ‘finance’ and ‘privilege’, whereby the crown’s financial need on the one hand was balanced by the city’s concern for its privileges on the other.⁶ How far did the metaphor of the

⁴ R. Horrox, ‘Local and national politics in fifteenth-century England’, *Journal of Medieval History*, 18 (1992), 393.

⁵ See, for example, T.F. Tout, *Chapters in the Administrative History of Mediaeval England*, 6 vols (Manchester, 1920–37), vol. 6, 318–19. The exception is L.M. Bryant, ‘Configurations of the community in late medieval spectacles: Paris and London during the dual monarchy’, in B.A. Hanawalt and K.L. Reyerson (eds), *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe* (Minneapolis, 1994), 20–5.

⁶ Among her many articles, see C.M. Barron, ‘London and the crown, 1451–61’, in J.R.L. Highfield and R. Jeffs (eds), *The Crown and Local Communities in England and France in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester, 1981), 88–109, esp. 91–2. For a similar model outside the capital, see L. Attreed, ‘Poverty, payments, and fiscal policies in English

chamber express and clarify the reciprocal nature of crown-town relations, in which the royal government drew on urban wealth and resources in return for the confirmation or extension of charters of corporate liberties?

At the same time, inasmuch as the chamber became an important symbol of civic identity to the cities of London, York and Coventry, this article will also engage with recent scholarship on the invention of urban myths in late medieval England.⁷ How and why, for example, did English cities seek self-consciously to define and establish their corporate image in relation to the crown? Gervase Rosser has argued that urban myths and symbols had no single fixed meaning, but rather that they could be continually adapted and applied to changing political circumstances and represented a 'contested territory' in which internal debates about a town's identity could be conducted.⁸ Through a close reading of the particular contexts in which the metaphor of the chamber was used, it will be argued that the chamber had a range of possible connotations, meaning different things at different times. The chamber deserves attention because, whilst in essence it articulated relations between urban communities and the crown, it also came to express relations between, and within, cities, from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries.

London: the 'king's chamber'

Students of medieval literature have long been aware of the use of building images in texts such as *The Castle of Perseverance* or Chaucer's *House of Fame* to represent certain abstract qualities or ideas,⁹ but the chamber was a different kind of architectural symbol in that it was not influenced by either biblical or classical tradition. It was part of a wider architectural vocabulary which cities employed in the late Middle Ages to describe themselves. In 1387, for example, London's civic elite referred to their city as the 'watch-tower of the whole realm', whilst in the 1450s Coventry was called 'the Queen's secret harbour', in reference to the frequent visits to the city of Queen Margaret of Anjou.¹⁰ What, then, was the particular significance of the royal chamber? The symbolism derived from the position of the king's chamber in the structure of royal

provincial towns', in S.K. Cohn Jr and S.A. Epstein (eds), *Portraits of Medieval and Renaissance Living: Essays in Memory of David Herlihy* (Michigan, 1996), 336–8.

⁷ For example, G. Rosser, 'Myth, image and social process in the English medieval town', *Urban History*, 23 (1996), 5–25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ Of recent studies, see J. Mann, 'Allegorical buildings in mediaeval literature', *Medium Ævum*, 63 (1994), 191–210.

¹⁰ *Memorials of London and London Life in the XIIIth, XIVth and XVth Centuries, 1276–1419*, trans. and ed. H.T. Riley (London, 1868), 492, and J.C. Lancaster, 'Coventry', in M.D. Lobel (ed.), *The Atlas of Historic Towns*, 3 vols (London and Oxford, 1969–89), vol. 2, 1.

government. By the twelfth century the king's chamber had two principal meanings. First, it was the king's bedchamber, in Chris Given-Wilson's words, 'the inner, private sanctum' of the household, in which the king 'dressed, bathed, slept, and often dined or worked away from the hubbub of the household, closeted in privacy with a small inner circle of friends and counsellors'; and second, it was the king's privy purse, a financial office with responsibility for the payment of the king's personal expenses which included jewels and plate, books, paintings and gifts for his friends.¹¹

In the late thirteenth to early fourteenth centuries the chamber acquired greater significance. On the one hand, this period saw an architectural shift in the relationship between the hall and the chamber, with the decline of the hall and the corresponding rise in importance of the chamber.¹² Although the extent of the hall's decline should not be exaggerated,¹³ it would appear that by the mid-fourteenth century the chamber had emerged as the focus of the social and political activity of the aristocratic and royal household. The impression from Langland's *Piers Plowman* is that the wealthy were withdrawing from the hall into the private and privileged space of the chamber to eat and entertain separately from the rest of the household:

Elenge is the halle, ech day in the wike,
 Ther the lord ne the lady liketh noight to sitte.
 Now hath ech riche a rule – to eten by hymselfe
 In a pryvee parlour for povere mennes sake,
 Or in a chambre with a chymenee, and leve the chief halle
 That was maad for meles, men to eten inne,
 And al to spare to spille that spende shal another.¹⁴

In the course of the fourteenth century the royal residences of Windsor and Eltham saw the construction of a 'multiplicity of chambers' and in these rooms, as Given-Wilson has argued, 'more things were now done . . . more eating, more discussion, more leisure activities'.¹⁵ On the other hand, the king's chamber became more important in royal administration under Edward II, gaining new functions and acquiring a greater sense of its own corporate identity, with a permanent staff and an income of its own.¹⁶ Although historians have questioned more recently the extent of Edward II's dependence on the chamber as an instrument

¹¹ C. Given-Wilson, *The Royal Household and the King's Affinity: Service, Politics and Finance in England, 1360–1413* (New Haven, 1986), 5.

¹² This trend is traced in M. Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven, 1978), 30, 40–6, and M. Thompson, *The Medieval Hall: The Basis of Secular Domestic Life, 600–1600 AD* (Aldershot, 1995), 116–17.

¹³ See the cautionary remarks of J. Grenville, *Medieval Housing* (London, 1997), ch. 4.

¹⁴ *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-Text*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London, 1978), Passus X, ll. 96–102.

¹⁵ Given-Wilson, *Royal Household*, 29–31.

¹⁶ Tout, *Chapters*, vol. 2, 314–60.

of 'his personal policy', there is no doubt that, under the Despensers, both the financial importance of the chamber and the political status of the office of chamberlain increased dramatically.¹⁷ By the early fourteenth century, then, the chamber had become a separate part of the royal household, with a clearly defined architectural and institutional character.

In his *Britannia*, published at the end of the sixteenth century, William Camden stated that the origin of London's claims to be the 'king's chamber' lay in the period just after the Norman Conquest, when the Norman kings rescued the city from Danish subjugation and began to grant privileges to London's citizens, enabling the city to flourish 'a new with fresh trade and traffique of merchants'.¹⁸ A few years later, Ben Jonson incorporated this passage in his text, *King James's Royal and Magnificent Entertainment*, written on the occasion of James I's entry into London in March 1604. On Fenchurch Arch, the first of the seven arches through which the new king was to journey, were the words, 'Londinium: Camera Regia', 'which title', according to Jonson's explanatory notes, 'immediately after the Norman conquest it [London] began to have; and by the indulgence of succeeding princes, hath been hitherto continued'.¹⁹ Unfortunately, Camden did not provide a reference to substantiate his assertion. His belief that London possessed a formal title of 'king's chamber' and that it had enjoyed this title from the arrival of the Normans must be seen as part of a wider interest at this time among London chroniclers and historians in the continuity of civic traditions.²⁰ In fact, the first documented reference to London as the 'king's chamber' seems to date only from 1328, a chronology which coincides, significantly, with the increasing architectural, administrative and political prominence of the king's chamber.

On 16 December 1328 Edward III wrote to the mayor, aldermen, sheriffs and commonalty of London, requesting the city's support for the cause of Mortimer and Isabella against a party led by the Earl of Lancaster in a conflict provoked by the arbitrary actions of Mortimer.²¹ The letter ordered that Lancaster's supporters should not find favour in

¹⁷ The quotation is from *ibid.*, 314. For a revision of Tout's view, see M. Buck, *Politics, Finance and the Church in the Reign of Edward II: Walter Stapeldon Treasurer of England* (Cambridge, 1983), 163–96.

¹⁸ W. Camden, *Britannia* (London, 1590), 374, trans. P. Holland, in W. Camden, *Britain* (London, 1610), 427.

¹⁹ A copy of Jonson's account of proceedings is in J. Nichols, *The Progresses of King James I*, 4 vols (London, 1828), vol. 1, 377–99. The quotation is from a recent translation of the text by R. Dutton, 'The Magnificent Entertainment by Thomas Dekker and Ben Jonson', in *idem* (ed.), *Jacobean Civic Pageants* (Keele, 1995), 38.

²⁰ F.S. Fussner, *The Historical Revolution: English Historical Writing and Thought, 1580–1640* (London, 1962), ch. 8. See below, 348.

²¹ For this and all subsequent references to the letter, see City of London, Corporation Record Office, Plea and Memoranda Rolls, A1b, mem. 31r., calendared in *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London, 1323–1364*, ed. A.H. Thomas (Cambridge, 1926), 77–8.

the city, 'which we consider our chamber'. To understand the meaning of London's designation as the 'king's chamber', this letter needs to be located within the broader context of London's relations with the crown in the period. Although in the first instance, London had benefited greatly from the regime of Mortimer and Isabella, receiving a whole package of concessions, including the 1327 charter, which increased substantially the city's corporate liberties, it was not long before Mortimer began to act in the same arbitrary way that the Despensers had done.²² London's mayor, Hamo de Chigwell, was a leading figure in the opposition to Mortimer and in September 1328, at the guildhall, he met, among others, John Stratford, Bishop of Winchester, and secured an agreement to seek redress of the country's ills in the next parliament.²³ The government of Mortimer and Isabella was told of the meeting and wrote immediately to the mayor, who tried unsuccessfully to dampen suspicions of a conspiracy. London's Lancastrian sympathies were already in evidence, for a London contingent of men-at-arms, led by the mayor's brother, Thomas de Chigwell, had joined Lancaster on Stratford's departure from the capital and had participated in the assault on Winchester, where they rallied supporters. In November 1328 the king summoned before him an embassy of twelve leading citizens at Windsor, who sought to disassociate themselves from the actions of a group of Londoners at Winchester by claiming that they had acted without their knowledge or consent. That the regime of Mortimer and Isabella was still not convinced of London's loyalty is made clear by the letter of December 1328.

This letter, described by Gwyn A. Williams as 'an unprecedented exercise in public relations' by the crown,²⁴ is certainly extraordinary. Accompanying the letter was a copy of a missive sent to the Earl of Lancaster providing a complete narrative account of the conflict from the crown's perspective and refuting, point by point, all of Lancaster's objections.²⁵ The letter was to be proclaimed publicly in London 'so that everyone should see openly that we have done all that befits us and so that no fault can be ascribed to us'. 'Never before', according to Williams, 'had such intimate detail of high policy been so bandied about the market place.' As we have seen, the crown's position was vulnerable in 1328; but why was London's support viewed as so crucial to the survival of the government of Mortimer and Isabella? There is no doubt that the author of the letter was conscious of the events of 1326–27 when London had been instrumental in Edward II's downfall. London's role in the overthrow of Edward II's government is well attested: hearing of the

²² For the charter, see G.A. Williams, *Medieval London: From Commune to Capital* (London, 1963), 298–9.

²³ The remainder of this paragraph draws heavily on *ibid.*, 301–2.

²⁴ This and the subsequent quotation from Williams are in *ibid.*, 303.

²⁵ The letter to the Earl of Lancaster was copied into the city records: *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls, 1323–1364*, 78–83.

invasion by Mortimer and Isabella, Edward and the Despensers clearly felt insecure in the capital and abandoned the city in September 1326 for Wales; in October the city revolted in support of the invasion, attacking the property of those associated with Edward II's government, most notably the estates of the Despensers, and murdering the king's treasurer, Bishop Stapeldon; and in January 1327 it was in London that oaths were sworn to the new regime in the city's guildhall and it was the Londoners who provided the popular acclamation in Westminster Hall which greeted the announcement of Edward II's deposition.²⁶ The letter of 16 December 1328, ostensibly from Edward III, expressed Mortimer and Isabella's fears that London's support for the Earl of Lancaster's cause could topple their government, just as it had helped to bring them to power. London's rulers were reminded of the fidelity and loyalty which they owed the king and were instructed not to show favour to Lancaster's followers or even to allow them to enter the city. In fact, if Lancaster's supporters approached the city, the Londoners, 'as our good people in whom we trust', were instructed to do whatever it took, 'beyond that which the law requires', in order to preserve the honour and status of the crown.

The letter to London appealed to the citizens' support as the king's loyal subjects and alluded to a special relationship between the crown and the city, expressing this relationship in terms of the metaphor of the chamber. In this instance the chamber appears to have had four connotations, which grew directly out of the role and significance of the chamber in royal government. The first was financial service to the king. The letter requested repeatedly that Lancaster's supporters should not be allowed to find 'favour' in the city; although exactly what form of assistance is not stated explicitly, given that London had previously provided a retinue of men-at-arms for Lancaster's cause, 'favour' can be interpreted as financial or material service. What was implied in the letter was that, if London was to give support to anyone, it was to be to the crown. Second, the idea of London as the 'king's chamber' had a spatial dimension. Just as the chamber, in an architectural sense, was a private space, so the city was the king's own personal residence into which the Lancastrian followers should not be allowed to enter. Third, the king expected order and peace from London. In the same way that his chamber provided him with a peaceful and orderly environment separate from the noise and commotion of the rest of the household and of the hall, in particular, so the city was to be a protected haven for the king, a defence from the disorder and tumult resulting from Lancaster's

²⁶ M. McKisack, 'London and the succession to the crown during the middle ages', in R.W. Hunt *et al.* (eds), *Studies in Medieval History presented to Frederick Maurice Powicke* (Oxford, 1948), 81–3; Williams, *Medieval London*, 295–8; N. Fryde, *The Tyranny and Fall of Edward II, 1321–1326* (Cambridge, 1979), 173–4; and, for the most recent interpretation of the deposition process, see C. Valente, 'The deposition and abdication of Edward II', *English Historical Review*, 113 (1998), 855–6, 858–61.

opposition to the crown. Fourth, and more generally, the chamber implied a special relationship and bond between London and the crown.

If it was the crown that called upon London as the 'king's chamber' at a time of great danger to royal authority, it is appropriate to ask how and why the term came to be adopted *by* the city. According to Thomas Walsingham, on 21 June 1377, the day of Edward III's death, London sent a delegation of prominent citizens led by John Philpot to Kennington to visit Richard of Bordeaux, the future king.²⁷ Aware that Edward III was in the throes of death, the Londoners acknowledged Richard as their new sovereign. Philpot, speaking on behalf of the city, addressed Richard and recommended to the prince's grace 'our city, that is, your chamber', and promised that the citizens would serve him 'both in word and in deed'.²⁸ Placed in the context not only of Philpot's address as a whole, but also of the crown's foreign policy, especially the planned campaign against France which was to depart from London in the summer of 1377,²⁹ this use of the chamber echoed almost directly its application in 1328. First, there was the idea of financial service; in this instance, service in foreign war. Philpot told Richard that, as the king's chamber, London was 'ready not only to give up its worldly goods, but also, if necessary, its life on your behalf'. Second, there was the sense that London was the king's home. Philpot, for example, expressed the city's concern that Richard had withdrawn his presence from London and its hope that as king he would now stay in the capital. Third, Philpot assured Richard that his residence in London would be a source of protection and would guarantee 'safety and solace'. In short, the metaphor of the chamber expressed the city's desire to cultivate a special and intimate relationship with the crown.

This relationship was reciprocal and, in the final line of his speech, the purpose of Philpot's visit to Richard became abundantly clear: London's representative asked that the new king settle the conflict which had recently arisen between the city and the Duke of Lancaster. This dispute, whose origins lay in the period immediately following the conclusion of the Good Parliament, centred on the serious threat posed to London's liberties by John of Gaunt's attempt to extend the jurisdiction of the royal household's court of the marshalsea over the borough of Southwark and the city, thereby challenging directly the powers of London's own courts.³⁰ Despite several efforts to secure peace, the dispute had not been resolved by the time of Edward III's death, so with the advent of a new

²⁷ *Chronicon Angliae, 1328–1388*, ed. E.M. Thompson (Rolls Series, 1874), 146–7. For a translation of the meeting, see J. Stow, *Annales* (London, 1615), 277–8.

²⁸ See *Chronicon Angliae*, 147, for this and what follows.

²⁹ A. Goodman, *John of Gaunt: The Exercise of Princely Power in Fourteenth-Century Europe* (London, 1992), 63–4.

³⁰ The main accounts of this quarrel are in R. Bird, *The Turbulent London of Richard II* (London, 1949), 24–6; Given-Wilson, *Royal Household*, 48–53; and Goodman, *John of Gaunt*, 60–2.

king London seized the opportunity to seek a reconciliation with the Duke of Lancaster. Through the rhetoric of the chamber Philpot appealed skilfully for royal intervention on two grounds. On the one hand, since London was the king's chamber the implication was that the conflict between Gaunt and the city was also of personal interest to the king. If London was 'our city, your chamber', the assault on London's liberties launched by Gaunt was an attack not just on the city, but also on the king. On the other hand, as London's repeated promises of support to the crown suggest, the city expected something in return for its service as the king's chamber. In his emphasis on service, personal access and intimacy Philpot was describing the relationship between London and the crown in courtier terms,³¹ and just as the language of court politics was about 'honour and service, and competition for favour, influence, and material rewards',³² so London sought favour and reward in return for its financial service.

Words, as Philpot acknowledged, were only important when accompanied by action. The day after the London delegation led by Philpot met Richard at Kennington, a royal deputation was sent to the city informing the citizens that the king promised to show favour to his city and its citizens and that he would come to London, as they had requested. At Sheen, the citizens and the Duke of Lancaster were reconciled by Richard and the peace was proclaimed publicly at Westminster.³³ Significantly for the city, the planned extension of the marshal's jurisdiction in the city was abandoned.³⁴ A few months later, in October 1377, London fulfilled its promise of financial support to Richard, providing a corporate loan of £5,000 to the crown as part of the English response to a series of French attacks on the south coast of England, Calais and Aquitaine.³⁵

London's appropriation of the metaphor of the chamber in 1377 must also be viewed in the context of the events of the Good Parliament which had taken place in the previous year. It was in this parliament that the commons attacked Edward III's court and impeached members of the courtier clique including the king's chamberlain, William Latimer.³⁶ The theme of the accusations against Latimer was his embezzlement of the king's money through his control of the king's chamber. Perhaps the most serious charge was that Latimer had fraudulently used some of the king's own money from his chamber to make a loan of 20,000 marks for an expedition to Brittany in 1374 on which he was paid interest of 10,000

³¹ A point noted in a different context by Bryant, 'Paris and London', 33, n. 103.

³² Harriss, 'Dimensions of politics', 7.

³³ *Chronicon Angliae*, 147–50, translated in Stow, *Annales*, 278.

³⁴ Given-Wilson, *Royal Household*, 52.

³⁵ London, Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), E401/528, 10 Oct. 1377, and N. Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven, 1997), 33–4.

³⁶ The best study of this parliament remains G. Holmes, *The Good Parliament* (Oxford, 1975), but see also Given-Wilson, *Royal Household*, 146–60.

marks by the king for his own personal profit.³⁷ That the chamber was seen by members of the commons as the 'instrument for some of his [Latimer's] most shady transactions' is made clear in the accusation that the town of Bristol had paid 10,000 marks to the king for a charter of liberties, of which the king had actually received 2,000 marks and Latimer the remainder.³⁸ Although this specific charge is found only in Walsingham's *Chronicon Angliae*, it is certainly true that Bristol had paid 600 marks into the king's chamber to secure the 1373 charter which granted the town county status and that the sum was an extraordinarily large sum of money, even though it was customary for a charter to be purchased with a payment into the chamber as a fine for the concessions contained in the grant.³⁹ Whether the accusation was true or not, more important was the contemporary *perception* of Latimer's abuse of the chamber to the detriment of the king. In this context, the subtext of John Philpot's speech in 1377 was that, if the chamber had failed the old king, London, as the 'king's chamber', would not disappoint the new king and would fulfil all of the responsibilities expected of the royal chamber. London, by claiming for itself this function, hoped to secure a close relationship with the crown, turning the negative connotations associated with the chamber in parliamentary politics to its advantage.

In the same way that London's rulers employed the metaphor of the chamber to assert the city's special relationship with the royal government, so it could also be applied to help repair that relationship when it broke down. In May 1392 Richard II moved the offices of state from Westminster to York and, one month later, seized London's liberties, removing the mayor and sheriffs from office and appointing a royal warden to rule the city on his behalf.⁴⁰ The reasons for Richard's actions were twofold: the city had stopped lending the king money, and there was a serious state of disorder in the capital.⁴¹ By August the king and the city were ready to settle their differences and London's rulers decided to dramatize the reconciliation with a series of pageants to be performed on the king's procession through the city.

The reception given to Richard and his queen on 21 August has received a great deal of scholarly attention, not least because the event was recorded in so much detail by contemporary observers, most

³⁷ *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, ed. J. Strachey *et al.*, 6 vols (London, 1767–77), vol. 2, 325. For discussion, see Holmes, *Good Parliament*, 65–7, 102–4, 113.

³⁸ Tout, *Chapters*, vol. 2, 288; *Chronicon Angliae*, 78.

³⁹ *Bristol Charters, 1155–1373*, ed. N. Dermott Harding, *Bristol Record Society*, 1 (1930), 118–21; H.C. Maxwell-Lyte, *Historical Notes on the Use of the Great Seal of England* (London, 1926), 342.

⁴⁰ The best discussion of this episode is C.M. Barron, 'The quarrel of Richard II with London, 1392–7', in F.R.H. Du Boulay and C.M. Barron (eds), *The Reign of Richard II: Essays in Honour of May McKisack* (London, 1971), 173–201.

⁴¹ See, with slightly different emphases, Barron, 'Quarrel of Richard II with London', 178–9, 200, and C.M. Barron, 'Richard II and London', in A. Goodman and J. Gillespie (eds), *Richard II: The Art of Kingship* (Oxford, 1999), 132–3, 152.

notably a Carmelite friar, Richard Maydiston, whose Latin poem *Concordia* was written to celebrate the occasion.⁴² To Paul Strohm, the welcome was strongly imbued with marital and erotic imagery, with the London citizens (the 'chastened bride') seeking the return of the king (the 'bridegroom') to London (the 'bridal chamber').⁴³ To Gordon Kipling, the informing idea of this royal entry, like other entries in the late Middle Ages, was the liturgy of advent, which turned the city into a new Jerusalem and the king into a Christ-like figure.⁴⁴ Kipling has argued convincingly that the pageants in the ceremonial entry of 1392 were based specifically on St John's description of the new Jerusalem at Christ's Second Coming, in which John 'saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' (Apoc. 21.2).⁴⁵ Behind both readings – marital and biblical – of the imagery of the civic reception, however, were the repeated allusions in Richard Maydiston's poem to the idea of London as the 'king's chamber'. It was this conceit which underpinned, and gave meaning to, the imagery invoked in 1392.

The royal warden, who met the king at London Bridge to present the keys and sword of the city to Richard as a symbol of the city's submission to the king's grace, addressed these words to the king:

With genuine tears, the city prays unceasingly that the merciful king will return to his chamber. Let not the most beautiful walls in the kingdom be rent nor torn, for they are the king's own and whatever is within them. Let not the bridegroom hate the bridal chamber which he has always loved. (*Concordia*, II. 142–6)

If the city, as a physical space, was the 'bridal chamber' ('thalamus'), whose streets were 'beautifully decorated' (*Concordia*, I. 57) and 'fragrant with a kind of sweet-smelling flower' (*Concordia*, I. 59), the citizens themselves were the 'bride' to Richard's 'spouse' (*Concordia*, I. 66), welcoming the return home of her estranged husband. Although doubts have been expressed about the 'reportorial status' of Maydiston's highly rhetorical account of the festivities,⁴⁶ there is no doubt that the rhetoric of the chamber made a significant impression on contemporary observers.

⁴² Two recent interpretations of the reception are G. Kipling, 'Richard II's "Sumptuous Pageants" and the idea of the civic triumph', in D. Bergeron (ed.), *Pageantry in the Shakespearean Theater* (Athens, Ga., 1985), 83–103, and P. Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow* (Princeton, NJ, 1992), 105–11. There is a translation and edition of Maydiston's poem by C.R. Smith, 'Concordia: Facta inter Regem Riccarduum II et Civitatem Londonie' (unpublished Princeton University Ph.D. thesis, 1973). The other main contemporary account is an Anglo-Norman letter written probably by a member of the king's household and the subject of H. Suggett, 'A letter describing Richard's reconciliation with the city of London, 1392', *English Historical Review*, 62 (1947), 209–13.

⁴³ Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 107.

⁴⁴ Kipling, 'Richard II's "Sumptuous Pageants"', 88–9, and G. Kipling, *Enter the King: Theatre, Liturgy, and Ritual in the Medieval Civic Triumph* (Oxford, 1998), *passim*.

⁴⁵ Kipling, 'Richard II's "Sumptuous Pageants"', 88–9. The quotation is from the Douai-Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate.

⁴⁶ Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 107.

At the end of the procession a royal feast was held in Westminster Hall, during which the steward of Richard II's household, speaking on behalf of the king, told the London citizens gathered in the hall that 'the king had been upset that, inasmuch as London was his chamber, he had been so badly served ("gardés")'.⁴⁷

London's self-representation as the 'king's chamber' was an essential part of the process of reconciliation between Richard and the city and it had a particular relevance to the events surrounding the king's displeasure towards the capital in 1392. The word 'gardés' referred to Richard's perceived maltreatment by London. In part, it related directly to the king's awareness of unrest in the capital, the appearance of which the citizens were at great pains to remedy on the king's visit in August 1392 when, under the direction of the city's warden, the citizens sought to beautify the city (*Concordia*, II. 57–64). Financially, the word looked backwards to the city's failure to provide the king with loans. According to the letter written by a member of Richard's household, on the day after the steward's speech in Westminster Hall the Londoners offered to pay £100,000 to the king for the return of the city's corporate liberties.⁴⁸ In fact, the king excused the city this enormous sum, but he still received a fine of £10,000 for the city's pardon.⁴⁹ It may be that the city's failure to provide both the security and the financial services expected of the chamber, a distinction claimed by London in 1377 on the king's accession to the throne, was the ultimate cause of Richard's anger in 1392. The status of the chamber was a double-edged sword which could be exploited to a city's advantage, but which could also intensify the crown's demands upon, and expectations of, a city.⁵⁰

Richard's confiscation of London's liberties in June had been immediately preceded by the transfer from Westminster to York of the central organs of royal government and the king's withdrawal from the capital to York and the midlands.⁵¹ Although these royal agencies were only told to return to Westminster in the autumn of 1392, Richard's entry into London on 21 August marked his return to the capital, and the spatial dimension to this use of the chamber was unmistakable: London was again the king's residence, complete with decorative streets and ornate walls (*Concordia*, II. 57, 144–5), and the Londoners were celebrating the king's return home. Indeed, there was a literal as well as figurative sense in which London, with its houses adorned with gold and silk hangings (*Concordia*, II. 60–2), was the king's chamber. The marital metaphor, to which both Kipling and Strohm made reference, was drawn from the apocalyptic narrative of Christ's entry into the new Jerusalem, but it also

⁴⁷ Suggett, 'Letter', 212.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁴⁹ Barron, 'Quarrel of Richard II with London', 191–5.

⁵⁰ These tensions are discussed below, 346.

⁵¹ Barron, 'Quarrel of Richard II with London', 181–2, and Saul, *Richard II*, 472.

capitalized upon London's claims to be the 'king's chamber' and, in presenting the city specifically as the bridal chamber, reinforced London's desire for a uniquely personal relationship with the king.

York: the 'king's chamber'

At precisely the same time, London's pretensions were challenged explicitly by the city of York. In the Winchester parliament of January 1393 Richard II was petitioned by the 'fellow-citizens of your city and chamber of York' requesting that York's mayor and aldermen be appointed *ex officio* justices of the peace.⁵² Why was the northern city using language which had previously been associated only with London? First of all, it was less than a year since Richard II had, in the summer of 1392, visited the city accompanied by the offices of government which he had transferred from Westminster to York. The significance of this relocation of royal government in the north has been the subject of recent debate. John H. Harvey argued that there was a special relationship between Richard II and the city of York and that when Richard moved the royal chancery, exchequer and the other royal courts to York in 1392 and suspended London's liberties, he considered seriously establishing his capital in the north on a permanent basis.⁵³ Nigel Saul, in a careful analysis of royal diplomatic practice, has demonstrated that this 'alternative capital' thesis, based heavily upon the evidence of Richard's visits to the city, cannot be sustained since the king did not visit the city any more than he did other towns and cities; in 1392, for example, the king, far from staying in York 'from early June to late November, with only occasional absence', as Harvey contended, spent only ten days there in June.⁵⁴ According to Saul, Richard's relationship with the city was not especially intimate.

Whilst it is certainly true that the transfer of royal government to York was only temporary and that the king himself did not spend as much time in the city as was once thought, Saul's argument underestimates the impact that the presence in York of the royal courts and the royal person had upon the city's inhabitants. At the end of May 1392 the offices of chancery and exchequer as well as the courts of common pleas and king's bench were instructed to move to York by 25 June and, although the order for their return to Westminster was given on 25 October, it is

⁵² PRO, SC8/103/5147. For the date of the petition, see the wording of the resulting grant in *Calendar of Charter Rolls, 1341-1417*, 336-7. For the significance of this request, see the seminal article on the emergence of the office of justice of the peace in urban communities: E.G. Kimball, 'Commissions of the peace for urban jurisdictions in England, 1327-1485', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 121 (1977), 448-74.

⁵³ J.H. Harvey, 'Richard II and York', in Du Boulay and Barron, *Reign of Richard II*, 202-17.

⁵⁴ N. Saul, 'Richard II and the city of York', in S. Rees Jones (ed.), *The Government of Medieval York: Essays in Commemoration of the 1396 Royal Charter* (York, 1997), 1-13, esp. 5, and Harvey, 'Richard II and York', 206-7.

clear that several organs of state, including the exchequer and common pleas, were still located in York after Christmas and were only operational again in Westminster by the middle of January 1393.⁵⁵ This period of government residence in York was 'without recent precedent' and recalled a time in the early fourteenth century when the city had acted, frequently and for long periods, as the administrative base for the crown's Scottish campaigns.⁵⁶ It can hardly be doubted that it was during Richard's albeit brief visit to York that the subject of the city's new charter was first broached and that, in his absence, negotiations continued with members of his administration still present in the city.⁵⁷ In describing the city as the 'chamber of York' in their parliamentary petition of January 1393, only a week or so after all of the offices of the royal administration had officially returned to Westminster, York's citizens looked back to the very recent past when their city had been the location of central government in close physical proximity to the organs of royal power. They were highly conscious, from their perspective at least, of a special and intimate relationship between their city and the king.

Second, the city's assertion that it was the 'king's chamber', in imitation of London, was another aspect of York's growing self-consciousness which was a feature of the later fourteenth century and which was also expressed, for example, in its immodest claim to be 'a city of great reputation and always named the second city of the realm',⁵⁸ presumably behind London. Whether this self-imaging was the product of self-confidence arising from the city's economic prosperity in the period, or insecurity bred by an awareness of the city's declining political importance in the kingdom, is a matter for debate.⁵⁹ Although York was not the only provincial city in the late Middle Ages to regard London as a role model and as an example to which to aspire,⁶⁰ there is

⁵⁵ *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1389–92*, 466–7, 565; *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1391–96*, 65; *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1392–96*, 21, 76; and Tout, *Chapters*, vol. 3, 482.

⁵⁶ The quotation is from N. Saul, 'Richard II, York, and the evidence of the king's itinerary', in J.L. Gillespie (ed.), *The Age of Richard II* (Stroud, 1997), 80. For the period 1298 to 1338, see D.M. Broome, 'Exchequer migrations to York in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries', in A.G. Little and F.M. Powicke (eds), *Essays in Medieval History presented to Thomas Frederick Tout* (Manchester, 1925), 291–300.

⁵⁷ In a similar situation in 1396, York's rulers took advantage of the king's presence in the city for a couple of weeks to begin negotiations for another charter, which then continued in London with chancery clerks for over a month: *York City Chamberlains' Account Rolls, 1396–1500*, ed. R.B. Dobson, *Surtees Society*, 192 (1978–79), 6–7.

⁵⁸ York, York City Archives (hereafter YCA), D1, f. 348r. The period also saw the expansion of civic record-keeping in York: S. Rees Jones, 'York's civic administration, 1354–1464', in idem, *Government of Medieval York*, 110–12.

⁵⁹ The two contrasting interpretations are provided in *Government of Medieval York* by B. Dobson, 'The crown, the charter and the city, 1396–1461', 42–4, and M. Ormrod, 'York and the crown under the first three Edwards', 31–3.

⁶⁰ S.H. Rigby, 'Urban "oligarchy" in late medieval England', in J.A.F. Thomson (ed.), *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester, 1988), 80–1. A good example, beyond the cities discussed in this article, is Norwich, whose rulers, at the beginning of Richard

compelling evidence that York's rulers, in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, were acutely aware of the city's status in relation to London. In 1372 and again in 1377 the crown instructed certain towns and cities, including York, to build a vessel for service at sea at their own expense.⁶¹ In 1378 the city petitioned Richard II and, reminding the king that it had built three ships 'at greater expense than any other city of the realm with the exception of London', asked for a confirmation of its charters of corporate liberties, as was customary on the accession of a new king, but on this occasion without the usual cash payment.⁶² Since York had only been required to build two vessels, the city had exceeded expectations and had spent more money, so it alleged, than any other city apart from London. It was against London that York measured itself, and its appropriation of the metaphor of the chamber in 1393 was a rhetorical device, employed by York's civic elite to impress upon the king their own self-importance and prestige and their desire to extend their authority within the city.

Although York's claim to be the 'king's chamber' in 1393 was articulated by the city's rulers for their own particular interests, this rhetoric was not the monopoly of the governing elite. Around 1400 the city's commons presented three petitions to the mayor and aldermen of York seeking a greater influence for the crafts in the government of the city.⁶³ In their third petition the commons asked for a threefold change to the city's franchise: not only was the cost of entering the freedom to be raised to at least 60s, but the craft searchers were to be responsible for examining candidates to ensure that they were skilled in their craft, whilst the mayor was to determine whether they were of 'good and honest behaviour'. As a result, York's franchise would be similar to 'the honourable cities of the realm such as London and Bristol', where men only gained admission to the freedom on payment of 60s or more and on proof that they were 'skilled and honest', in contrast to 'lesser towns such as Lynn and Hull', where entry to the freedom could be secured for 40s. Furthermore, the commons claimed that, since the city of York 'is and always has been . . . a city of great reputation and always named the second city of the realm and the king's chamber', it was not appropriate for dishonest men to be received into the freedom to enjoy the privileges of such an honourable city.

II's reign, sought to secure some of the same chartered privileges as London: L. Attreed, 'The politics of welcome: ceremonies and constitutional development in later medieval English towns', in Hanawalt and Reyerson, *City and Spectacle*, 212.

⁶¹ PRO, E403/447, 27 Nov. 1372, *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, vol. 3, 5–6, and *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1377–81*, 32–3.

⁶² PRO, SC8/216/10758. For the normal process of charter confirmation, see Tout, *Charters*, vol. 4, 291–2.

⁶³ Although undated, internal evidence suggests a date of c. 1400. All references to the petitions are to YCA, D1, f. 348r-v.

The commons were the citizens of York who belonged to the civic franchise but who did not hold high civic office, such as chamberlain, sheriff or mayor. In the late fourteenth century they were represented by the searchers of the crafts on the council of forty-eight, which was the third tier in York's structure of civic government, alongside the councils of twelve and twenty-four.⁶⁴ The council of forty-eight seems only to have been assembled on specific occasions to give its assent to decisions already made by the inner councils, such as the levying of a civic tax in 1378 to repair York's barge which had been built for war at the city's expense and which was now in a dilapidated state.⁶⁵ Whilst the commons' legislative role could be seen as a public relations exercise designed to secure widespread support for the ordinances of the ruling elite, the commons also had the right to petition the mayor and aldermen to express their grievances.⁶⁶

The petition concerning the tightening of the rules for admission to the freedom was a reaction by the commons to the growing power of the ruling elite in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, who were selling the privilege freely without discretion in order to expand the city's corporate resources.⁶⁷ York's civic elite were confronted by an articulate and assertive commons who were anxious that only properly qualified craftsmen should be admitted to the franchise and who wanted the craft searchers to have a greater power of selection over entry to the freedom. Rather than draw attention to the damage inflicted upon the crafts which they represented, the commons first drew explicit comparison with London and Bristol and then invoked York's claims to be the 'king's chamber' and 'second city of the realm'. Tapping into the acute sense of rivalry and competition for status so evident in the city's 1378 and 1393 petitions, their petition suggested implicitly that the reputation of the city would be harmed and its prestige undermined if access to the freedom was not regulated by the crafts.

If the rhetoric of the 1378 and 1393 petitions enhanced the honour and dignity of York's civic elite, the commons appropriated the same language to appeal to the pretensions of the city's rulers. In this way, the chamber, as a symbol of corporate civic identity and a source of civic

⁶⁴ *York Memorandum Book*, ed. M. Sellers, 2 vols, *Surtees Society*, 120, 125 (1912, 1915), vol. 1, iv-ix. York's civic government at the end of the fourteenth century is described in E. Miller, 'Medieval York', in P.M. Tillott (ed.), *A History of Yorkshire: The City of York* (Oxford, 1961), 77-9.

⁶⁵ *York Memorandum Book*, vol. 1, 30. Norwich's common assembly appears to have had similar powers: B.R. McRee, 'Peacemaking and its limits in late medieval Norwich', *English Historical Review*, 109 (1994), 835.

⁶⁶ H. Swanson, 'The illusion of economic structure: craft guilds in late medieval English towns', *Past and Present*, 121 (1988), 47. For the commons' role as petitioners, see Miller, 'Medieval York', 80-4.

⁶⁷ A charge borne out by statistical evidence of the increasing number of people entering the franchise in the late fourteenth century: R.B. Dobson, 'Admissions to the freedom of the city of York in the later middle ages', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 26 (1973), 17-22.

pride, was deployed by both groups to extend their political authority within the city. The evidence from York in the late fourteenth century supports Rosser's argument that, whilst civic symbols and images could be invoked 'to lend prestige to a particular regime' within a town, they 'set up resonances which echoed far beyond any single or narrow political position' and provided an opportunity for 'parties in dispute' to articulate and debate particular issues with the dominant civic elite.⁶⁸ Although the commons' petition was rejected, despite the sophistication of their argument,⁶⁹ the chamber was a powerful civic symbol which could be valuable in the negotiation of political relations within and without the urban community.

Coventry: the 'prince's chamber'

The adaptability of the chamber to changing political circumstances is no better illustrated than in the case of Coventry in the Wars of the Roses. It has long been recognized that the civil wars of the mid-fifteenth century created new difficulties for towns in their relations with the crown, making them unsure of the reception they should give to rival royal and noble protagonists.⁷⁰ In September 1456 Margaret of Anjou was welcomed into the city of Coventry by a collection of biblical, saintly and mythical figures, including the Nine Worthies, the first of whom, Hector of Troy, greeted the queen at a pageant station between the cross and the conduit in Cross Cheaping, the commercial centre of the city, and addressed her in the following words:

Most pleasaunt princes recordid þat may be,
I, Hector of Troy, þat am chefe conqueroure,
Lowly wyll obey yowe & knele on my kne,
And welcum yowe tendurly to your honoure
To this conabull cite, the princes chamber;
Whome ye bare yn youre bosom, joy to þis lande,
Thro whome in prosperite þis empyre shall stand.⁷¹

In 1474 the infant Prince Edward, son and heir of Edward IV, visited the city and was received into 'this your chaumbre, so called of Antiquite',⁷² but the reputedly ancient origin of Coventry's status as the 'prince's chamber' is doubtful.

⁶⁸ Rosser, 'Myth', 8, 15.

⁶⁹ The petition has been crossed through in the civic record.

⁷⁰ Barron, 'London and the crown', 88–109; D.J. Guth, 'Richard III, Henry VII and the city: London politics and the "Dun Cowe"', in R.A. Griffiths and J. Sherborne (eds), *Kings and Nobles in the Later Middle Ages* (Gloucester, 1986), 185–204; and Attreed, 'Politics of welcome', 215–25.

⁷¹ *The Coventry Leet Book*, ed. M.D. Harris, 4 vols, *Early English Text Society*, original ser., 134, 135, 138, 146 (1907–13), vol. 2, 289.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 391.

It has been argued that Coventry was first called the 'prince's chamber' in the second half of the fourteenth century when the city belonged to the Black Prince.⁷³ The city certainly had strong associations with Edward III's eldest son. On the death in 1358 of Isabella, Edward II's queen, the manor of Cheylesmore, including Coventry, reverted to the Black Prince in accordance with an agreement made in 1337 on his elevation to the dukedom of Cornwall: henceforth the citizens of Coventry were his tenants and the city's fee farm contributed to his landed income.⁷⁴ From this date the city continued to be part of the patrimony of the king's eldest son, the Prince of Wales. Coventry was, for example, one of the properties granted to Richard of Bordeaux in 1376, Henry of Monmouth in 1399 and Edward of Lancaster, only son and heir of Henry VI, in 1455.⁷⁵ In fact, whilst Coventry could claim a connection with the Black Prince, there are much more compelling reasons why the city first chose to describe itself as the 'prince's chamber' in 1456.

The appropriation by Coventry of the metaphor of the chamber in September 1456 was prompted, as in the case of York in 1393, by the transfer of the king's government to the city. In the summer months of 1456 the king withdrew from London and the south, moved to the midlands, and in September established his court at Coventry where it stayed, with only the occasional break, until July 1460. Though the main offices of state remained at Westminster, Coventry at this time was very much the Lancastrian capital where the king maintained his court and held a series of great councils as well as a parliament.⁷⁶ As in 1393, one of the main reasons for the king's movement north lay in the perception of widespread disorder in London, on this occasion the result of anti-alien riots.⁷⁷ That the king should consequently feel safe in the midlands, and in Coventry in particular, can be explained both by the city's close proximity to the queen's dower estates of Leicester, Tutbury and Kenilworth, and by Coventry's close political relationship with the Lancastrian regime. Not only had Henry VI, after commending Coventry's rulers for having 'the best ruled pepull thenne withe-in my Reame', granted the city a charter in 1451 separating it from the county of Warwickshire and elevating it to the status of a county in its own right, but the city had repaid this privilege and provided tangible evidence of the king's 'speciall trust' in it by sending a retinue of 100 soldiers to fight

⁷³ Lancaster, 'Coventry', 1, and C. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979), 140.

⁷⁴ *Register of the Black Prince*, 4 vols (London, 1930–33), vol. 4, 261, 264–5, and *Calendar of Charter Rolls, 1327–41*, 432.

⁷⁵ *Calendar of Charter Rolls, 1327–41*, 432; *Report from the Lords' Committees ... for all Matters Touching the Dignity of a Peer*, 5 vols (London, 1820–29), vol. 5, 56, 129; and *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, vol. 5, 293–4.

⁷⁶ R.A. Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI: The Exercise of Royal Authority, 1422–1461* (London, 1981), 772–85.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 790–5.

with the king at St Albans in 1455.⁷⁸ In 1456 the term 'chamber' articulated the city's claim to occupy a special and honoured place within the Lancastrian polity.

Coventry's fashioning of itself specifically as the 'prince's chamber' was the result of two factors. First of all, in a financial sense, the city, ever since its association with the Black Prince, was one of the principal properties of the Prince of Wales, to whom the citizens paid revenue in the form of an annual fee farm. Second, and more importantly, Coventry's rulers were acutely aware of the Lancastrian concern with royal lineage at this time and of the importance which the king attached to the birth of an heir to buttress the Lancastrian dynasty.⁷⁹ In August 1456 the city's rulers made preparations to receive Queen Margaret and Prince Edward, but the young prince did not make his planned entrance into the city.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, while the king himself was a peripheral figure in the royal reception, barely mentioned in the civic record, the queen was welcomed into Coventry with visual imagery and language which focused on her relationship with the absent prince.⁸¹ Whether it was the speeches of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, who congratulated the queen on the birth of the prince, or the words of St Edward the Confessor who informed the queen that he would pray 'for prince Edwarde, my gostly chyld, whom I love principall', or the ordering of the pageants which ensured the appearance of the prince's patron saint before the belated arrival of St Margaret in the last pageant of the entry, the pageants performed for the queen referred specifically to the prince.⁸² The theme of the pageants was the prince's birth nearly three years earlier, which Isaiah likened to Christ's nativity and which St John the Evangelist believed 'shall cause grete melody' in the kingdom.⁸³ In dramatizing this event Coventry's rulers were doing more than expressing their joy at the advent of their new feudal overlord; if, as Ralph Griffiths has suggested, Richard Duke of York, Henry VI's adversary, also entertained serious dynastic ambitions at this time,⁸⁴ Coventry's decision in 1456 to focus its attention on the prince can be seen as a declaration of the city's loyalty to the Lancastrian line. Indeed, it is interesting to note the way in which Coventry's self-designation as the 'prince's chamber' in September 1456 anticipated, and later chimed in with, Margaret of Anjou's development and use of the prince's council as an agent for royal government and as a means to legitimate her

⁷⁸ For the background to the 1451 charter, see *Coventry Leet Book*, vol. 2, 262–6. The charter is in *Calendar of Charter Rolls, 1427–1516*, 116–17, and the city's response to the king's letter requesting troops is in *Coventry Leet Book*, vol. 2, 282–3.

⁷⁹ R.A. Griffiths, 'The sense of dynasty in the reign of Henry VI', in C. Ross (ed.), *Patronage, Pedigree and Power in Later Medieval England* (Gloucester, 1979), 13–36.

⁸⁰ *Coventry Leet Book*, vol. 2, 285–6, 292.

⁸¹ For the single reference to the king's presence, see *ibid.*, 292.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 287–92, and Kipling, *Enter the King*, 316.

⁸³ *Coventry Leet Book*, vol. 2, 287–8.

⁸⁴ Griffiths, 'Dynasty', 25–8.

unauthorized power from autumn 1456, at a time when the king was incapacitated.⁸⁵ In appropriating the metaphor of the chamber, Coventry's rulers demonstrated their sensitivity to the struggle for royal authority in the mid-1450s and made a highly nuanced gesture of reciprocity towards the Lancastrians, expressing the city's allegiance to a dynasty from which it had benefited so much in the form of chartered liberties.

That Coventry's claim to be the 'prince's chamber' could be adapted to new political circumstances was made manifest in the royal entry arranged for Edward IV's son and heir, the three-year-old Prince Edward, in April 1474. At Bablake gate, one of the main entrances into the walled city, the young prince was addressed first by the figure of 'Rex Ricardus', presumably Richard II:

Welcom, full high and nobull prince, to us right speciall,
To this your chaumbre, so called of Antiquite!
The presens of your noble person reioyseth our hartes all;
We all mowe blesse the tyme of your Natiuite.
The right lyne of the Royall blode ys now as itt schulde be;
Wherefore God of his goodnes preserue you in bodily helth,
To us and your tenauntes here perpetuall ioy; and to all the londis welth!⁸⁶

King Richard was followed immediately by the three patriarchs, one of whom welcomed Edward into 'this his Chaumber, as prynce full reuerent', whilst St Edward the Confessor, at the next pageant station, repeated the greeting, receiving the prince 'Vnto this your Chaumber, as prynce full excellent'.⁸⁷ Compared with 1456, this was a more emphatic statement of Coventry's status as the 'prince's chamber', the main reason for which was the prince's actual presence in the city in 1474.

The chamber in 1474 had several meanings. First, there was a spatial dimension in the sense that Coventry was part of the prince's patrimony and the chamber a physical reality which was his to enter.⁸⁸ Second, the citizens were, as King Richard reminded the prince, his 'tenants', whose feudal dues were paid to the prince, a financial relationship acted out in a gift-giving ceremony when, in the words of the city's *Leet Book*, the mayor and his brethren rode out to meet the prince to accompany him into the city, 'welcomyng hym to his Chaumber and yevyng hym there a C mark in a gilt Coppe of xv Ounce'.⁸⁹ But the rhetoric of the chamber was also politicized. Coventry had been an important Lancastrian base

⁸⁵ I would like to thank Caroline Barron for this point. For the queen's attempts to extend her authority by drawing upon the legitimacy of the prince, see Griffiths, *Henry VI*, 781–2, and Watts, *Henry VI*, 337–40.

⁸⁶ *Coventry Leet Book*, vol. 2, 391. For the identification of the speaker as Richard II, see below, 344.

⁸⁷ *Coventry Leet Book*, vol. 2, 392.

⁸⁸ Coventry was granted to the prince in 1471 as part of the duchy of Cornwall: *Dignity of a Peer*, vol. 5, 383–4.

⁸⁹ *Coventry Leet Book*, vol. 2, 391.

in the 1450s, but with the change of royal dynasty in 1461 the city lent its support to the Yorkists just as it had to the Lancastrians, providing troops to join the Earl of Warwick's northern expedition in 1461 when Henry VI and his queen fled to exile in Scotland.⁹⁰ The period 1469 to 1471 was dominated by a political crisis caused by the breach between Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, and Edward IV, in which control of the royal government changed hands with extraordinary rapidity: first Warwick rebelled and imprisoned the king, then Edward regained power, precipitating Warwick's successful invasion in September 1470 and Henry VI's Readeption, before finally, in March 1471, Edward IV invaded from the Low Countries, defeated Warwick at the battle of Barnet and regained possession of the throne.⁹¹ In this atmosphere of uncertainty Coventry's rulers made the fatal mistake of supporting the losing side and the city paid the penalty with the loss of its corporate privileges.

In March 1471, as Edward IV marched south to London to reclaim the crown, he advanced on the city of Coventry, to which Warwick, on hearing of his approach, had withdrawn.⁹² Despite being significantly outnumbered by Warwick's forces, Edward took his soldiers to Coventry and asked that the earl leave the city to fight, an invitation Warwick refused and continued to reject for several days. Edward then moved to the town of Warwick to give the earl a further opportunity to vacate Coventry, but the earl did not take it and, in the meantime, Edward and his brother, George Duke of Clarence, Warwick's erstwhile ally, were reconciled. After a week of negotiations in which Warwick refused repeatedly to confront Edward, the Yorkist king finally left the midlands for London. Coventry, as a walled city, had offered protection to the earl, but how much active support the city gave Warwick at this point is uncertain. Coventry's geographical location in the midlands and its proximity to the centre of the road network meant that the city had a strategic significance in the Wars of the Roses.⁹³ Yet Warwick would not have gone to the city in the first place to wait for reinforcements if he had not known that he would be welcomed there, and there are signs that he had a support base in the city which he had been cultivating for a number of years.⁹⁴ As well as loyalty to Warwick, the city may also have

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁹¹ The best narrative account of these events remains C. Ross, *Edward IV* (London, 1974), 126–77. For the most recent discussion of the causes of the rift between Warwick and Edward, see M. Hicks, *Warwick the Kingmaker* (Oxford, 1998), 255–78.

⁹² For what follows, see *Historie of the Arrivall of Edward IV in England and the Finall Recouerye of his Kingdomes*, ed. J. Bruce, *Camden Society*, 1 (1838), 8–13. Although the chronicle is a Yorkist narrative, designed to celebrate Edward IV's achievements and to denigrate the Earl of Warwick, Coventry's role in Warwick's resistance is borne out by the city's subsequent fate.

⁹³ C. Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401–1499* (Cambridge, 1992), 17, 497–8.

⁹⁴ For communication between Warwick and the city, including the letter from Warwick to

had lingering Lancastrian sympathies, but whatever the reason, once it had helped to shelter the earl, it committed itself firmly to the Lancastrian cause, lending money and soldiers to Warwick for the battle of Barnet.⁹⁵ Coventry had to ensure that the earl was successful since the city would suffer the consequences if the Yorkists were victorious.⁹⁶ Unfortunately for Coventry, the earl was killed at Barnet and Edward IV regained the crown, first seizing the city's liberties and only returning them after Coventry had paid a fine of 400 marks, and then granting the city a charter of general pardon in 1472 'for the hevy greffe pat our seid soueraign lord beer to the Citee & inhabitantes perof' when they had 'kept the Citee in defence' against the king.⁹⁷

The visit of the Prince of Wales in 1474 was the first by the Yorkists since the city's liberties had been restored. In this situation, Coventry's repeated allusion to its ancient status as the 'prince's chamber' formed the city's developing strategy to combat the difficulties created by the earlier dynastic uncertainties. In the same way that London's customary response to the Wars of the Roses was to 'wait for the winner and then to help legitimise his control by treating him like all previous winners', in London's case with pageantry and money,⁹⁸ so Coventry's rulers decided that, just as they had referred to the city as the 'prince's chamber' to emphasize their loyalty to the Lancastrian dynasty, the same language could also express their fidelity to the Yorkists. In fact, when the Tudors supplanted the Yorkists and Arthur, son and heir of Henry VII, came to Coventry in 1498, the young prince received similar treatment to his Lancastrian and Yorkist predecessors and was greeted by three figures each welcoming him into 'bis youre Chaumbre'.⁹⁹

In 1474 the rhetoric of the chamber was also designed to settle the Yorkists' unease about their legitimacy. As a usurping dynasty, the Yorkists were very conscious of the need to establish their legitimate possession of the crown based on hereditary right, which they did through the creation and dissemination of manuscript genealogies and prophecies.¹⁰⁰ In the welcome for the prince in 1474, Coventry's rulers tapped into the Yorkists' genealogical interest to present Edward as the lawful heir to the throne both through heredity and prophecy.¹⁰¹ First, there was the presence of Richard II, to whom the Yorkists believed they were the legitimate successors, who told the prince that with his birth

'his servondis & wolwyllers with-in the cyte of Covyntre' on 12 Jun. 1469 informing them of the forthcoming marriage of Clarence and Warwick's daughter, see *Coventry Leet Book*, vol. 2, 332, 341–2.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 364–6.

⁹⁶ Barron, 'London and the crown', 96–7.

⁹⁷ *Coventry Leet Book*, vol. 2, 367–71, 381.

⁹⁸ Guth, 'Richard III, Henry VII and the city', 186.

⁹⁹ *Coventry Leet Book*, vol. 3, 589–92.

¹⁰⁰ A. Allan, 'Yorkist propaganda: pedigree, prophecy and the "British History" in the reign of Edward IV', in Ross, *Patronage, Pedigree and Power*, 171–92.

¹⁰¹ For what follows, see *Coventry Leet Book*, vol. 2, 391–2.

'The right lyne of the Royall blode ys now as itt schulde be'. Second, one of the three patriarchs proclaimed that the prince 'of most nobull blode' was their heir in fulfilment of biblical prophecy. Ignoring the recent past and their previous support for the Lancastrians, the city's rulers drew attention instead to the antiquity of the city's status as the 'prince's chamber', by virtue of which they had a special relationship with the prince ('prince, to us right special'), whose birth as the rightful heir to the throne had brought particular joy to the citizens as the prince's tenants. Given the theme of the 1474 royal entry, it is perhaps hardly surprising that at the end of the visit the mayor and city council were ordered to swear an oath of loyalty to the prince, acknowledging him as 'verray and vndoubted heire' to the throne, whom they would be ready to serve at all times and for whom they would even die if the situation demanded it.¹⁰²

Conclusion

In late medieval England the chamber denoted an attitude to relations between urban communities and the crown based essentially upon the values of intimacy and physical proximity, order and financial service. The metaphor was used specifically by London, York and Coventry as part of the process by which they re-negotiated their relations with the crown at certain critical moments. The chamber never became a formal title,¹⁰³ and the cities only distinguished themselves as royal chambers at specific times, often preceding, during or following periods of royal presence in the city, when they wanted something from the crown, either to acquire (as in the case of York in 1393), to regain (as in the case of London in 1392) or to preserve (as in the case of Coventry in 1474) their chartered liberties.

There were other channels of communication and other terminology, such as the language of patronage, which cities could employ to gain the attention of royal authority.¹⁰⁴ One important context in which crown-town relations were conducted was parliament. Although parliament may have been less important to London's civic elite since the city's proximity to the royal government gave Londoners regular access to the king, this was not true for provincial cities.¹⁰⁵ Parliament was a political

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 393–4.

¹⁰³ Interestingly, the idea of London as the 'king's chamber' did not appear, for example, in John Carpenter's history of London's constitutional status and customs at the beginning of the *Liber Albus*, which was compiled in the early fifteenth century: *Munimenta Gildhallae Londoniensis: Liber Albus, Liber Custumarum, et Liber Horn*, ed. H.T. Riley, 3 vols in 4 (Rolls Series, 1859–62), vol. 1, 3–127.

¹⁰⁴ For the concept of 'good lordship' in relation to urban communities, see Attreed, 'Politics of welcome', 208–31.

¹⁰⁵ Bryant, 'Paris and London', 25, and C. Barron, 'London and parliament in the Lancastrian period', *Parliamentary History*, 9 (1990), 343. The importance of parliament to Bristol and York is discussed in C.D. Liddy, 'Urban communities and the crown:

arena which had its own language and was concerned primarily with 'national security, social and political division, good governance' and taxation.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, the status of a royal chamber could be a burden. Whilst it denoted a special relationship which could be exploited by a city to forward its own interests, this same relationship could also work against a city, leading the crown to expect more than it was able to provide and to interfere in its affairs,¹⁰⁷ or being invoked by the urban commons in disputes with the civic elite. The experiences of London, York and Coventry may well have led the rulers of other towns and cities to think again about the value of such self-promotion and may explain why only these cities proclaimed themselves royal chambers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Nevertheless, the special relationship which London, York and Coventry claimed with the crown, predicated on their access to royal authority, their financial service and loyalty to the crown in return for the preservation or extension of chartered privileges, and the image of stability and unity which they presented to the royal government, has a wider relevance to the study of crown-town relations. Not only does the chamber provide further evidence of the reciprocal nature of these relations but, as a symbol of corporate civic identity, it also serves as a reminder of the position of royal towns and cities within the late medieval English polity and of the importance which they attached to their relationship with the crown. The charters of liberties which these cities received did not grant autonomy, but incorporated them more fully into the apparatus of royal government, increasing the royal obligations of their rulers.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the way in which London, York and Coventry tried to define themselves as royal chambers and competed with other cities for status suggests that the predilection among urban historians for compiling league tables measuring the performance of late medieval English towns and cities would have struck a chord with the cities themselves in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁰⁹ Inasmuch as cities were ambitious for access to the crown and sought its favour and privilege in return for service, competing for position with each

relations between Bristol, York and the royal government, 1350–1400' (unpublished University of York D.Phil. thesis, 1999), ch. 5.

¹⁰⁶ Harriss, 'Dimensions of politics', 15.

¹⁰⁷ L. Attreed, 'Arbitration and the growth of urban liberties in late medieval England', *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), 205–35, esp. 207, explores some of the tensions in relations between urban communities and the crown resulting from 'those occasions when a city petitioned for royal help and an outright solution to its problems but feared the advantage the crown could take if invited to interfere in local affairs'.

¹⁰⁸ A point made recently by D.M. Palliser, 'Towns and the English state, 1066–1500', in J.R. Maddicott and D.M. Palliser (eds), *The Medieval State: Essays Presented to James Campbell* (London, 2000), 127–45.

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth in English Towns, 1400–1640* (Basingstoke, 1991), which synthesizes the modern debate about urban decline.

other, the chamber was part of a larger courtier discourse of crown-town relations in which the cities were royal suitors.

Epilogue

The metaphor of the chamber proved remarkably enduring and continued to be appropriated by cities in the early modern period to respond to new situations in which they found themselves. The chamber formed part of the rewriting of the civic past and the reshaping of a shared corporate identity which, as Robert Tittler's recent work on the political culture of post-Reformation towns has shown, took place in a number of urban communities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹¹⁰ According to Tittler, civic elites, seeking to bolster their own authority and to secure the loyalty of their citizens in a period of dramatic social, economic and religious change, aimed to refashion 'a common local history or memory' and to encourage 'their fellows to undertake a more informed appreciation of their own community, of its heritage, of its distinctiveness, and of the necessary authority of its governing elite'.¹¹¹

Thus, in Coventry in 1581, on the occasion of the Earl of Leicester's visit to the city, a series of Latin and English verses were composed about several figures of local as well as national significance, including the legendary Leofric and Godiva, and displayed in the guildhall.¹¹² Two were in honour of the Black Prince and were accompanied by depictions of the city's arms and the prince's heraldic device.¹¹³ On the one hand, the verses commemorated the prince as a paragon of chivalric values ('the floure of chevalre'), whose heroic actions had won famous victories against the French; on the other hand, they represented him as a local hero who had established his residence in Coventry ('Hic sedem posuit') and who had championed the city's rights and extended its corporate liberties. This particular association with the Black Prince can only be seen, however, as a case of selective civic memory: it was not the Black Prince but Queen Isabella, the mother of Edward III, who, as overlord of Coventry from 1330 to 1358, had actively supported the city in its long-running conflict with the prior and had promoted its interests at court, helping to restrict the prior's power in the city and to unite Coventry under the newly-formed jurisdiction of the mayor and bailiffs.¹¹⁴ The

¹¹⁰ R. Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns in England: Politics and Political Culture, c.1540–1640* (Oxford, 1998), 270–304.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 292, 336.

¹¹² See J.C. Lancaster, *St Mary's Hall, Coventry: A Guide to the Building, its History and Contents*, 2nd ed. (Coventry Papers, 3, 1981), 8. For the story of Leofric and Godiva, see *idem*, *Godiva of Coventry* (Coventry Papers, 1, 1967).

¹¹³ B. Poole, *Coventry: Its History and Antiquities* (London, 1870), 123–4, and for what follows.

¹¹⁴ For two views of Coventry's early history and its division between the 'Earl's half' and the 'Prior's half', see P.R. Coss, 'Coventry before incorporation: a re-interpretation',

Black Prince was a figure of particular interest in the later sixteenth century,¹¹⁵ and the 1581 verses celebrating his relations with the city, inscribed as they were on oak panelling fixed to the east and west walls of the great hall in St Mary's Hall, the seat of Coventry's civic government, aimed to reinforce the authority and legitimacy of the city's ruling elite at a time of rising social tension caused largely by serious economic decline.¹¹⁶

In 1604 London's rulers elaborated upon the capital's traditional claims to be the 'king's chamber' as part of a similar mythologizing of the city's past. Entering the city of London in March 1604 before his coronation, James I was welcomed first through Fenchurch Arch, decorated with the words, 'Londinium: Camera Regia'.¹¹⁷ This title provided an organizing scheme for the whole event, as the king progressed through various arches, each of which represented a different part of the royal court, including a series of royal chambers such as the presence chamber and the privy chamber.¹¹⁸ The idea of London as the 'king's chamber', which London's rulers had drawn upon in the city's medieval past, was the basis of the city's defence of its special position within the kingdom. Specifically, the conceit was a defensive gesture made in response to anti-London writings which blamed the capital's commercial dominance for the economic contraction experienced by many of England's provincial cities in the sixteenth century.¹¹⁹ The authority and legitimacy of tradition was invoked to validate the changing distribution of power in the present.

Nowhere was this more true than in the case of Bristol. In 1628 Bristol petitioned Henrietta, Charles I's queen, asking for her intercession with the king in order to annex Bristol castle and its precincts to the city under the mayor's authority.¹²⁰ The castle had been a jurisdictional minefield

Midland History, 2 (1974), 137–51, and A. and E. Gooder, 'Coventry before 1355: unity or division?', *Midland History*, 6 (1981), 1–38. Although they disagree about the extent of the division before the early fourteenth century, they agree that it was Isabella's intervention in the city's dispute with the prior which was crucial to the emergence of civic government in Coventry.

¹¹⁵ For this interest in 'the history of great men of action' in Elizabethan England, see M. McKisack, *Medieval History in the Tudor Age* (Oxford, 1971), 121.

¹¹⁶ For the socio-economic background, see Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 269–78.

¹¹⁷ For what follows, see Dutton, 'Magnificent Entertainment', 38, 66, 85.

¹¹⁸ The proliferation of chambers within the royal court took place over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: D. Starkey, 'Intimacy and innovation: the rise of the privy chamber, 1485–1547', in *idem* (ed.), *The English Court from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War* (London, 1987), 73–4.

¹¹⁹ J. Knowles, 'The spectacle of the realm: civic consciousness, rhetoric and ritual in early modern London', in J.R. Mulryne and M. Shewring (eds), *Theatre and Government under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge, 1993), 157–89, esp. 161–2. For a similar gesture, see Thomas Dalton's *An Apologie of the Cittie of London* published in 1603, in Stow's *Survey: J. Stow, A Survey of London . . . with introduction and notes by Charles Lethbridge Kingsford*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1908), vol. 2, 196–207. For further comment, see Fussner, *Historical Revolution*, 226.

¹²⁰ For what follows, see R. Ricart, *The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. L.T. Smith, *Camden Society*, new ser., 5 (1872), 113–18. The quotation is from 113–14.

for Bristol's rulers for a long time; since it lay outside civic jurisdiction the castle precincts offered a safe haven for criminals. In the petition the city appealed to the queen, reminding her that:

the Cittie of Bristoll hath aunciently bene reputed and called the Chamber of the Queenes of England, as London is called the Kinges Chamber, and it hath pleased the Queenes of England, your most noble predecessors . . . soe to esteeme thereof as to receive and take the same unto her especiall favour and protection whiles she lived. And bycause the same City is parcell of your Majesties jointure wee most humbly pray your Majestie to receive it into your Highnes favour.

Bristol's connection with the queen was close and long-standing, for the city had first been annexed to the queen's dower in 1274 when Edward I provided his wife, Eleanor of Castile, with a landed income of her own,¹²¹ but how long the city had been known as the 'queen's chamber' is debatable. Certainly, the antiquity of Bristol's title is questionable, since the city's records reveal only the occasional reference to the 'Chambre of Bristowe' and 'her Majestes Chamber', and these date from 1535 and 1612 respectively.¹²² The evidence from Bristol shows, however, that the chamber was, as it had always been, an occasional rhetorical device, which continued into the seventeenth century to play a part in the symbolic language of politics through which relations between urban communities and the crown could be mediated. Moreover, as in the cases of York and Coventry in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Bristol's rulers looked self-consciously to the example of London for inspiration. In such continuities lie the importance of the metaphor of the chamber.

¹²¹ *Calendar of Charter Rolls, 1257–1300*, 193.

¹²² Ricart, *Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, 54, 65.