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Ambition and Anxiety: Courts and Courtly Discourse, ca. 700 – ca. 1600

Introduction

This volume presents ten papers, most of which had their origins in one of two interdisciplinary conferences organised by the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Durham University: 'Courts and Courtiers East and West' in 2004, and 'Power' in 2007. Together, these papers approach a number of basic questions:

1. In medieval and renaissance societies, what conditions typically defined the power relationships between the poets, prose writers and political figures who worked within sophisticated courtly elites and the kings or other magnates who were their patrons (or in a few cases, actually poets themselves)?
2. What images of themselves and the courts of which they were a part did these literary artists seek to project, either to each other or to outsiders, and what methods did they employ in order to do it?
3. What caused some 'courtly' writers to suggest, rightly or wrongly, that they were not members of the court, or that they were merely on the fringes of it?

4. Under what circumstances and to what ends might modes of literary discourse or patterns of behaviour normally associated with courts be used by writers who were actually outside any definition of the court?

The essays are organised chronologically, and the overall scope of the volume is deliberately as wide-ranging as possible; chronologically, it considers courts from the early eighth century to the late sixteenth, and although its main focus is on western European courts, we include essays on the courts of Tang China and the Ottoman Empire as representatives of courts further afield; it would be equally possible to take examples from Byzantium, the Arab world or Iran, and conditions in the courts which flourished in these cultures will sometimes be alluded to in this introduction.

It is easy to challenge the common notion that courtly culture is an invention of and confined to the later European Middle Ages, and many comparisons can be drawn between the literature of European courts and that of their Islamic or far eastern counterparts. Chronologically, too, the earlier medieval period has often been thought to contain no courtly culture because of its relative paucity of written records, especially in north-western Europe; but the fact that many of these societies were predominantly oral cultures does not necessarily imply that their elites lacked cultural refinement. Often, a more searching investigation of them reveals courtly circles with sophisticated and exclusive traditions of poetic and artistic achievement. Indeed, from a literary point of view, the fact that a society was predominantly oral often made the position of the court poet even more central, for a ruler's all-important posthumous reputation and his society's sense of its own past both depended crucially on the ability of his poets to compose impressive and memorable verse about him. The comparative approach of our volume serves to focus attention on central issues that recur throughout the broad period under scrutiny.

The term ‘court’ clearly implies a certain level of refined culture which is not shared by the general population of the same nation at the same time, but it is often difficult to define the essential features of this ‘high culture’. Even writers who were courtiers themselves sometimes declare themselves perplexed, whether seriously or as an ironic expression of the bewildering variety and arbitrary fortunes of courtly experience. In his *De nugis curialium* (‘*On Courtiers’ Trifles*’), the twelfth-century cleric Walter Map, who had first-hand experience of the court of Henry II of England, compares the court to Hell and writes:

> Ego simili possum admiracione dicere quod in curia sum, et de curia loquor, et nescio, Deus scit, quid sit curia. ... In recessu meo totam agnosco, in reditu nichil aut modicum inuenio quod dereliquerim; extraneam uideo factus alienus.
>
> Si quod Boecius de fortuna ueraciter asserit de curia dixerimus, recte quidem et hoc, ut sola sit mobilitate stabilis. Solis illis curia placet qui graciam eius consecuntur.
>
> In a like spirit of perplexity I may say that in the court I exist and of the court I speak, and what the court is, God knows, I know not. ... When I leave it, I know it perfectly; when I come back to it I find nothing or but little of what I left there. I am become a stranger to it, and it to me.
>
> If we apply to the court Boethius’ true definition of fortune, we find it also correct in saying that the court is constant only in inconstancy. To those alone is the court satisfactory who obtain her grace.[1]

[1] Walter Map, *De nugis curialium* I,1, ed. M.R. James, C.N.L. Brooke and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: OUP, 1983), 2-3.

In some cultures and periods the court seems to have been roughly equivalent to the household of an independent ruler. Elsewhere, as in later Anglo-Saxon England, it might be associated with a small group of pious and refined noble families. In other cases again, as in Tang China, Ottoman Turkey and some of the non-royal 'courts' maintained by European bishops, membership of the court might vary according to the occasion but was chiefly composed of high-ranking officials, scholars and lawyers, who qualified for their positions by dint of learning, musical or poetic skill or administrative grasp, rather than by birth or military power.

Another central question is where a court could be said to be situated. In some cultures, it seems to have been almost synonymous with the monarch's presence, and we might have expected this pattern to be associated with the more rudimentary courts and with early stages of development. Sometimes the evidence seems to bear this out, as in tenth-century Norway, but this is by no means always the case. The court that gathered round Charles d'Orléans after his return from captivity in England in 1440 was certainly not simple or unsophisticated, and yet the attention of its members and much of their literary culture seems to have been focussed on the presence, personality and literary achievements of their lord, who was seen as the sun round which they had their orbits.[2] Similarly, the flowering of poetic talent at the late-medieval Scottish court was inspired by a king who was himself a poet (James I, killed in 1437), and its four major figures – Henryson, Dunbar, Douglas and Lindsay – were all closely associated with the royal family (or in Henryson's case, with the chapel royal school). The common factor shared by these three courts is not lack of

[2] Jane H.M. Taylor, *The Making of Poetry: late-medieval French poetic anthologies* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007); 8-9 and chapter 2, "Preserved as in a Violl: Charles d'Orléans' Circle and his Personal Manuscript" (83-146).

sophistication, but lack of security: kings of Norway were constantly forced to do battle with rival claimants to the throne; Charles was more often a quasi-royal pawn in the politics of others than a potential king of France in his own right; and the five Scottish kings of the period between 1424 and 1542 all died young, four of them violently.

If identification of the court's location with the whereabouts of the monarch is often a symptom of insecurity, its opposite is perhaps to be found in courts which came to be symbolised by and identified with particular places and particular sets of buildings. This could happen even when the monarch was in fact extremely mobile, as in the case of Charlemagne's Aachen, where his fortified chapel and palace formed a powerful statement of political might and religious ideals as well as of his courtly refinement,[3] and must have contributed to the authority with which his secretary Alcuin wrote to the emperor's subjects. In Tang China, the architecture of the imperial palace and the disposition of the emperor's retinue among different parts of it again made a clear statement about the power and orderliness of his rule, which was also expressed in the refined poetry of the emperor and his court. The Ottoman palace complex of Topkapı Sarayı played an important role in emphasising the seclusion and mystique of the emperors who lived there. Another prominent example of a particular building that exemplified a court is Hampton Court; in 1522, when John Skelton, in his provocative poem 'Why Come ye Not to Court?' posed the question:

> Why come ye nat to court?
>
> To the kynges courte?

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[3] See Janet L. Nelson, "Aachen as a place of power", in *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Mayke de Jong and Frans Theuws with Carine van Rhijn, The Transformation of the Roman World 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2001): 217-41.

Or to Hampton Courte?

The kynges courte

Shulde have the excellence;

But Hampton Court

Hath the preemynence![4]

he was in effect asking the provocative question: 'Who rules England – the King or Cardinal Wolsey, with his iconic new building project at Hampton Court?' Before many years had passed, however, Wolsey had fallen and Hampton Court had become the icon of Henry VIII's personal power and magnificence.

There may be a case for suggesting that identification of the court and its poetic energies with the person of the monarch is often a sign of insecurity, while the association of them with a particular place tended to happen when the ruler was powerful and commanded a large, settled bureaucracy (even if powerful members of that bureaucracy might occasionally emerge as temporary rivals to the monarch, as in the cases of Wolsey or of Sokullu, the grand vezir whose power was undermined by the Ottoman emperor Murad III). In a third pattern, signs of respect for courtly refinement accompany the courtier as well as the monarch, and these may be suggestive of situations of diffused power, as in late Anglo-Saxon England, where beautifully illustrated manuscripts of poetry in the vernacular, such as Oxford, Bodleian Library Junius 11, were probably designed for use by learned and pious lay noblemen. This suggests that the refined taste and spiritual instruction of such nobles had to be catered for even when they were not with the king, and that the 'essence' of court culture resided in them as well as in him.

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[4] "Why come ye nat to courte?" 401-09, in John Skelton, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Scattergood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 289.

Our knowledge of medieval and early modern courts usually depends to a large extent on their writers and artists. A few of the voices who are our court guides are those of monarchs or near-monarchs (for example, the Emperor Xuanzong in China, John Palaeologos in Byzantium, Charles d'Orléans in France and James VI and I in Scotland and England), important nobles like Anna Comnena in Byzantium, or administrators such as Alcuin of York or Walter Map. But many more come from among the humbler ranks of royal and other courts, and chief among these are poets, whose experiences and concerns often seem remarkably similar from one culture to another. They are not unbiased witnesses, for in many cultures their primary function was to praise the ruler who was their patron, and in some cases also to ensure his post-mortem reputation. This was an important social and political role, and it can be found throughout the medieval and renaissance eras and in both east and west: in Tang China, Viking-Age Norway, Seljuq Iran,[5] later medieval Germany and sixteenth-century England, to mention only a few examples.

Praise from his poets, together with a demonstration of the refinement or intellectual brilliance of his court, was important to almost every courtly ruler, and poets were often lavishly rewarded, perhaps because the skills required of them were rare. In most cultures they would be expected to master a refined courtly manner, a particular style or range of styles, a command of traditional vocabulary and imagery combined with some originality in the use of it, and often one or more difficult epigrammatic metres as well. In some courts, a poet could be asked to produce refined

[5] For a layman's introduction to the role of the poet at Persian-speaking courts between the tenth century and the early seventeenth, together with a selection of short poems in modern English translation, see Dick Davis, *Borrowed Ware. Medieval Persian Epigrams* (London: Anvil Press, 1996), especially 11-16.

verse at short notice (e.g. in China) or even extempore (as in Scandinavia), and he was likely to be required to compose for a range of situations that might stretch from the most serious religious ceremonies to the most informal occasions; sometimes he might even have to be the bearer of an important political message that the monarch did not want to hear. Thus the eleventh-century Norse poet Sigvatr was asked both to help secure the canonisation of his former king, St. Óláfr (in his *Óláfsdrápa*, 'Formal Poem for Óláfr'), and also to give Óláfr's son Magnús some very frank advice to stop oppressing the farmers who had opposed his father (in his *Bersǫglisvísur*, 'Plain Speaking Verses').[6] At the other end of the Middle Ages, the early sixteenth-century poet William Dunbar, who worked at the court of James IV of Scotland, composed a range of poems that runs from the aureate hymn *Ane Ballat of Our Lady* and the religious instruction of *The Maner of Passyng to Confessioun* to a number of poems for the circle of Queen Margaret that include a description of a party that got out of hand (*Ane Dance in the Quenis Chalmer*) and jokes about syphilis (*Madam, your men said thai wald ryd*); he can also be quite outspoken, as when, in lines 134-147 of *The Thrissill and the Rois*, he advises the king to give up fornication.[7]

Although there are some famous exceptions (including a few monarchs, like the Tang Emperor Xuanzong, Guillaume IV, Duke of Aquitaine and James I, King of Scots), most courtly poets were of relatively humble birth, and the variety of praise, instruction and entertainment that was expected of them meant that their relationships with the lords they served were often complicated and usually ambiguous. The poet

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[6] See *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, A-B I-II (Copenhagen / Kristiania: Gyldendal / Nordisk Forlag, 1908-15): B I, 234-39.

[7] See *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), nos. 2, 5, 28, 32, 50.

had to judge when to be religiously reverent, deferential to his monarch, sententious as a teacher, familiar as a friend or outrageous as an entertainer, and the consequences of misjudging the moment could be disastrous. Walther von der Vogelweide's poetry for his patron, the Bishop of Passau, is a good example of the narrow line between friendship and over-familiarity that the poet had to be careful not to cross. Further problems might be faced by poets whose patrons were female, since many societies normally disapproved of men who were dependent on women; strangely enough, this seems to have been less of a problem for early medieval writers such as the author of the eleventh-century *Encomium Emmae*[8] than it became at the end of the Middle Ages, when tensions between dependency and male self-respect appear in such female-patron works as Skelton's *Speke Parrot* and *The Garland of Laurell* and Jean Dupré's *Le Palais des Nobles Dames*.

The poet's continued prosperity might also depend on factors that were entirely beyond his control. He relied entirely on voluntary rewards, which might be slow in coming, as the tenth-century Persian poet Daqiqi complains:

> My life has been one patient long delay:
>
> Rewards, it seems, must wait till Judgement Day.[9]

Other courtiers might malign him behind his back, or his lord might get tired or suspicious of him, or prefer one of his rivals – the fate complained of by the protagonist of the Old English poem *Deor*.[10] It is not surprising, therefore, that many courtly poets show a strange combination of fascination with the court's potential

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8 *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, ed. Alistair Campbell, Camden Third Series 72 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1949).

9 Trans. Davis, 39.

10 *Old English Minor Heroic Poems*, ed. Joyce Hill, 3rd ed., (Durham: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies / Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2009), 37-38, 47-49.

rewards and fear of its potential dangers. Again, John Skelton provides a good example; in 1498, while he was tutor to Prince Henry (later Henry VIII), he composed the dream-vision masque *The Bowge of Courte*, in which the first-person protagonist, who is called Drede, meets Desyre, one of the gentlewomen of the unequalled lady, Dame Saunce Pere, whose motto is *Garder le fortune que est mauelz et bone* 'keep hold of (or 'beware of') Fortune, which is bad and good'. Desyre gives the dreamer a jewel called *Bone aventure*, 'good luck', which enables him to board the lady's ship (called 'The Bowge of Courte', i.e. the free rations allowed to courtiers). Once on board, however, he discovers that his companions on the ship are Favell ('flattery'), Suspycyon, Hervy Hafter (who practises robbery with violence), Disdayne, Ryote, Dyssymulation and Disceyte. As they close in with the intention of killing him, he leaps overboard to escape – and wakes up to find it was only a dream:

> But yet ofttyme suche dremes be founde trewe.[11]

And yet, after Skelton was pensioned off to become rector of Diss in Norfolk around 1503, he clearly felt an irresistible urge to return to court. He was certainly back there by about 1512, and he remained at court or on the fringes of it for the rest of his life, despite an extremely dangerous quarrel with Cardinal Wolsey.

The poet was often also dependent on the continued survival and success of his lord. The Old English poem *The Wanderer* (probably from the tenth century) presents the stereotypical figure of a narrator who has lost his lord through death, and laments that:

> … geara iu goldwine mine
> hrusan heolstre biwrah and ic hean þonan

[11] *The Bowge of Courte* 538, ed. Scattergood 61. On Skelton's later career, see Scattergood 16-19.

wod wintercearig ofer waþema gebind,
sohte sele dreorig sinces bryttan,
hwær ic feor oþþe neah findan meahte
þone me in meoduhealle minne myne wisse
oþþe mec freondleasne frefran wolde,
weman mid wynnum.[12]

… years ago I covered my gold-giving lord in the darkness of the earth, and wretchedly travelled away from there, sorrowful as winter, over the expanse of waves, sadly sought the hall of a treasure giver where far or near I might find one who would show me favour in the mead-hall or comfort me in my friendless state, entice me with pleasures.

It was not in fact always impossible to gain the favour of a new lord, as the experience of many Norse skaldic poets shows, but loss of one's lord remained a potent fear, from Iran[13] to Scotland, where Dunbar almost entirely disappears from the record after the sudden fall of his patron James IV at Flodden in September 1513.

Because courts were usually founded on elite social traditions that were widely admired in theory, even by writers who satirised the courtly misbehaviour that they actually observed around them in practice, they tended to be slow to change – but of course they did undergo change, and sometimes this placed strain on their members. The change involved might be one of language (like that from Arabic to Persian in tenth-century Iran, or from French to English in late fourteenth-century England) of dynasty (like the arrival of the 'alien' Turkish Seljuq rulers of Iran, the Anglo-Danish dynasty in England from 1016-1042, or the Normans in later-eleventh-

12 *The Wanderer* 22-29, ed. T.P. Dunning and A.J. Bliss (London: Methuen, 1969), 108-10.

13 See Davis 13-14.

century England and Southern Italy) or of religion (such as the coming of Christianity to Scandinavia in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries), or it might have a variety of other causes. Study of these changes and dislocations, and of the reactions to them found in literary works, can often reveal the full extent of the artistry, and sometimes the courage, of poets placed in near-impossible situations.

Other interesting attitudes towards courtly culture can be observed by studying how they are portrayed in literary works by individuals or classes of individual who were not themselves courtiers, or who were fringe members or exiles from it. Those who are or regard themselves as being on the fringes often show a marked sense of insecurity (as in the cases of John Skelton and Henri Estienne, which are both discussed later in this volume). Similarly, 'outsiders' sometimes portray the contemporary courtly elite as impressive and worthy of description in terms of literary romance or *chanson de geste*, even if violent and sometimes treacherous; this is, for example, the view of the court of the dukes of Normandy that emerges in the early twelfth-century *Roman de Rou*, whose poet must have been quite well informed about that court even though he seems not to have been a courtier himself.[14] But it was perhaps commoner for prosperous and educated members of bourgeois populations to absorb courtly values, or to demonstrate that refinement was a matter of character, education and morality rather than wealth, status or proximity to the monarch. Thus the bourgeoisie of Arras in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, with its famous minstrel guild, was quite capable both of producing entertainments that influenced courtly fashion, such as Adam de la Halle's *Li Gieus de Robin et de*

[14] See Françoise Le Saux, "'La geste des trois fils Guillaume'? Henry I in Wace's *Roman de Rou*", *Reading Medieval Studies* 34 (2008): 191-207.

Marion,[15] and of deploying similarly refined values and interests for the enjoyment of fellow citizens, as in his *Jeu de la Feuillée*[16] or the many *jeux-partis* from Arras.

Sometimes the interaction between insider and outsider could become quite complicated, as when Chaucer makes the old hag in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* pronounce on courtly values:

> 'And he that wole han pris of his gentrye,
> For he was boren of a gentil hous
> And hadde his elders noble and vertuous,
> And nel hymselven do no gentil dedis
> Ne folwen his gentil auncestre that deed is,
> He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl,
> For vileyns synful dedes make a cherl…
> Thy gentilesse cometh fro God alone.'[17]

In this story, a semi-supernatural *fée* figure is addressing and reforming the sinful noble courtier whom she has just married, but the speaking character is a mouthpiece for the bourgeoise Wife of Bath, who is herself a creation of Chaucer the courtier

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15 Adam de la Halle (or le Bossu), *Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion*, ed. Kenneth Varty (London: Harrap, 1960); the first performance of this very popular play was probably at the royal court in Naples at Christmas 1283 (see Varty 12).

16 Adam le Bossu, *Le Jeu de la Feuillée*, ed. Ernest Langlois, 2nd ed. (Paris: Champion, 1984). This play was probably written ca. 1276; it must have been performed in Arras, since it is full of allusions to Adam's family and neighbours, including his rival Robers Sommiellons, whom he mocks by making the Queen of the Fairies claim to have fallen (very briefly) in love with him, as if he were a thirteenth-century French Bottom the Weaver (ll. 708-761, ed. Langlois, 31-33).

17 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, *The Canterbury Tales* D 1152-8, 1162; see *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson and others (Oxford: OUP, 1988), 120.

poet. However, the fairy, the bourgeoise and the courtly poet probably agree that noble courtiers ought to show refined morals as well as refined taste, and that it is perfectly legitimate to criticise them when they do not.

Some other literary 'outsiders' are concerned, not with the court as it is in their own time and culture, but with the exotic courts of far-away lands or remote periods of time as they were imagined to be or to have been; settings such as these might enable writers to comment on admirable and despicable aspects of courtly behaviour without placing themselves in personal danger of reprisal. One example of how outsiders might view alien courts can be seen in medieval English and French romance, where supposedly contemporary Saracen courts are regarded with a mixture of fascination and fear: they resemble the courts of the West (and sometimes even outdo them in splendour), but are at the same time fundamentally alien in their heathenness (which, however, is sometimes finally transcended in fantasy, as it could not be in reality). Sometimes, a Saracen court can become the setting for a romantic encounter, as in the romance episode at the beginning of the Life of Thomas Becket in the *South English Legendary*, where Becket's parents are Gilbert of London and a Saracen princess who falls in love with him while he is a prisoner of the Saracens, and later leaves her own people and comes to England to find and marry him.[18] Here, although the heathenism and subsequent conversion of the princess are an issue, it is probably the remoteness and exotic nature of the Saracen court that is uppermost in

[18] *St. Thomas a Becket* 1-120, in *The South English Legendary*, ed. Charlotte d'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, Vol. II, Early English Text Society 236 (London: OUP, 1956), 610-14. This story exerted a long-lasting popular appeal outside any courtly context, as we can see from its survival in the English ballad *Young Beichan*, no. 53 in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. F.J. Child, 5 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1882-98, reprinted New York: Dover, 1965): I, 454-83.

the story, for a rather similar (if less idealised) tale of imprisonment, love and elopement at the end of the Icelandic *Grettis saga* is set in Christian Byzantium.[19]

Elsewhere, we occasionally find Saracen rulers portrayed in European literature as magnanimous princes, like the Emir in *Floris and Blauncheflur*.[20] He has been intending to marry Blaunchflur himself, and is outraged when he finds the hero and heroine naked in bed together in his harem, but when each of them pleads to be allowed to die to save the other, he forgives them, arranges their marriage, makes Floris one of his knights, and eventually allows him to return to an unspecified Spanish kingdom, where he succeeds his father as king. Part of the reason for the Emir's merciful behaviour is that his courtiers all feel noble pity for the lovers and do their best to persuade him to pardon them. This was a powerful story, versions of which can be found in a variety of European languages, and it continued to resonate in European consciousness long enough to survive as the plot of Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. In tales like this, the suggestion may be that some (fantasy) Muslim courts are more 'Christian' in spirit than their (actual) western counterparts. Criticism of malice and corruption at court becomes an increasingly common discourse in later medieval romance in Western Europe, and the perception of Saracen courts as doubly alien in relation to the West could manifest itself in a variety of ways.

Many other literary works are concerned with imaginary versions of the royal courts of the distant past. Sir Thomas Malory's idealisation of the practice of refined

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19 *Grettis saga* chs. 87-92, ed. Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit 7 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1936), 274-89; trans. Denton Fox and Hermann Pálsson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 176-87.

20 *Floris and Blauncheflur*, ed. F. de Vries (Groningen: V.R.B., 1966), 110-21.

love at the court of King Arthur is an archetypal example of the tendency to draw a contrast between the inadequate present and the idealised past:

> And ryght so faryth the love nowadayes, sone hote sone colde. Thys ys no stabylyté. But the olde love was nat so. For men and women coude love togydirs seven yerys, and no lycoures lustis was betwyxte them, and than was love, trouthe and faythefulnes. And so in lyke wyse was used such love in kynge Arthurs dayes.[21]

Stories of imaginary versions of courts of the far past also appear in both the frame narrative and many of the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*, or *Alf Layla wa-Layla*. At the heart of this collection of stories is a fascination with the court of the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, and in particular with his relations with his vizier Ja'far and other members of his entourage. In contrast with the Arthurian cycles, which can derive very little from the historical fifth-century British leader on whom the figure of Arthur may originally have been based, it is possible to explore the relationship between historical fact and the literary fantasy of the *Thousand and One Nights*. However, what really makes Hārūn al-Rashīd's court memorable is not what it was like in historical fact, but rather a literary fascination similar to that which royal courts held for many actual courtiers, including performing poets: its sense of simultaneous opportunity and danger, in which the fictive performing storyteller Shahrazād stakes her life daily on her ability to please her monarch with her tales.

Returning to specific cases of historical courts, our first essay is by David McMullen, who writes on the place of verse at the court of Tang China in the eighth

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[21] *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver vol. III, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1947), 1120.

century and the uses made of it by the Emperor Xuanzong (685-762, reigned 712-756). His study illustrates how the court might be defined either as the emperor's household, as the formal meetings and religious rituals at which he and the senior members of his administration were present, or as the less formal feasts and excursions at which officials and scholars were expected to produce verse of specific kinds (often in praise of the emperor). Conventional occasions for the composition of verse by the emperor himself might include annual or occasional ceremonies, feasts for newly-appointed officials sent to govern outlying provinces, military successes and visits to religious sites and centres of learning. Xuanzong made use of all of these to compose and promulgate verse which cemented his own power but also put forward traditional ideals of harmony, frugality, moderation and restraint. Although conventional themes such as complaint against injustice, pleas for preferment and enjoyment of the reclusive life were closed to him by virtue of his position, and although he did not achieve heights of original lyrical expression, his verse is learned and accomplished and retains a sense of stateliness and decorum even for the modern reader.

Some surprising parallels emerge between this paper and the next, in which John McKinnell considers the role of poetry at the much more rudimentary royal court of Norway in the period c. 962 – c. 1040. Norwegian court poets, like their Chinese counterparts, were routinely expected to produce extempore formal verse at feasts and were often richly rewarded for doing so by the patrons they praised. However, during this period many of them risked the displeasure of newly-converted Christian kings if they failed to adapt their poetic diction to their patrons' new faith, despite the fact that much of that diction traditionally relied on images derived from pre-Christian mythology. The four poets considered here all show an impressive

technical mastery of skaldic form, but each takes a different stance towards the new religion: thus Eyvindr skáldaspillir's *Hákonarmál* (ca. 962-5) asserts the poet's heathenism even while commemorating a Christian king. Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa* (ca. 990, probably commissioned by the aggressively heathen Hákon jarl Sigurðarson) is a *tour de force* in praise of the god Þórr, but his quatrain on Christ (995 or later, probably for the Christian king Óláfr Tryggvason) shows basic misunderstandings of the new religion. Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld's occasional verses on his conversion (composed between 995 and 1000 for Óláfr Tryggvason) show the aesthetic problems faced by a reluctant convert. The extensive output of Sigvatr Þórðarson (active ca. 1015- ca. 1040) in praise of 'Saint' Óláfr Haraldsson shows how a committed Christian could use the tradition with very few allusions to pre-Christian mythology, even employing it as part of a successful campaign to have his former patron canonised.

Daniel Anlezark's focus is on the same period but on a collection of poetry which was probably compiled for an important member of a very different court. He argues that MS Oxford Bodleian Junius 11, a finely illustrated late-tenth-century manuscript of Old English poetry on mainly Old Testament subjects, was made for a politically powerful layman who moved in West Saxon royal circles, and provided him with a practical understanding of the relationship between divine and human sovereignty. Although at least one of its constituent poems (*Exodus*) clearly has a layer of allegorical meaning, the whole manuscript can be interpreted on a literal historical level as providing Old Testament models of good and bad behaviour by secular rulers and those who owed immediate loyalty to them. The compilers and illustrator of this manuscript were probably reformed Benedictine monks (and there is some evidence that by the 1040's it was probably in the possession of the Benedictine

monastery at Malmesbury);[22] but although they were not themselves courtiers, there is no indication here of any differences of viewpoint between clergy and laity about the kind of behaviour that was expected of secular rulers and their noble supporters.

Another view of the uncertain relationship between a semi-professional courtly poet and his patron is provided by Jeffrey Ashcroft, who investigates the attitudes expressed towards his patrons by Walther von der Vogelweide, and in particular the episode in which he was given a fur cloak by Bishop Wolfger of Passau. Here we see a poet who must tread a narrow line between the ability to presume on a personal relationship with his prince and the common religious attitude that looked on *joculatores* as servants of the devil.

Neil Cartlidge discusses the large body of *jeux-partis* associated with the upper bourgeoisie of the northern French town of Arras in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and shows that although the authors of these debate poems were not themselves members of the court, those who take part in them often put forward viewpoints which they present as 'courtly', while their opponents' arguments may be criticised as 'peasant' or 'bourgeois'. These poems also show an ability to discuss love merely for the enjoyment of doing so. For their authors, literary and ethical refinement becomes a way of participating in (or in some cases, appropriating for the purposes of debate) the values of a court of which they were not literally a part, and to membership of which they did not aspire.

Elizabeth Evershed considers the poetry of John Skelton, and in particular his dream vision or masque *The Bowge of Court* (1498). She demonstrates the sense of the insecurity of life at court in this poem, and how its protagonist Drede (who is in

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[22] See *Exodus*, ed. P. J. Lucas (London: Methuen, 1977, revised ed. Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1994), 2-5.

one sense a self-portrait, but in another a kind of learned Everyman figure) is both fascinated by the prospect of good fortune at court and appalled and intimidated by the deceit and potential violence that he finds there. Paradoxically, *The Bowge of Court* dates from the period of Skelton's life when he had most objective reason to consider himself a successful insider at court, and yet it is haunted by a sense of insecurity that may spring from the lack of a stable centre that characterised the early Tudor court, and from a sense of deception and artifice in all its members, including Drede himself.

John McKinnell's paper on the Scottish satirical poem *Cokelbie Sow* (1501 or earlier) argues that it was probably composed for a festive gathering of Edinburgh lawyers closely associated with the court of King James IV (reigned 1488-1513). This poem certainly includes a good deal of mockery of rogues, Gaelic speakers and peasants, the latter being presented as somewhat less decisive and heroic than pigs, but the poet also has some more elevated targets, such as Gaelic epic, Charlemagne romances, saint's lives, alchemical writing, beast epic and the rising merchant class (since one of the heroes of the poem becomes the richest egg-merchant in the world). The one ideal that seems to be taken seriously is the injunction never to allow oneself to be bullied out of asserting one's legal right.

The relationship between poet and patron was likely to be particularly delicate and ambiguous when the latter was female. Helen Swift discusses an early-modern French example of this in Jean Dupré's *Le Palais des Nobles Dames* (1534), a dream-vision poem in which the narrative *je* ('l'Acteur') recounts his tour of the chambers and garden of the palace of Marguerite de Navarre, whose female occupants addressed to him their claims to fame, which he subsequently set down as a catalogue of noble women (a form that had also been employed in England by Skelton, though

in a much simpler way, in his *Garland of Laurell*). Swift's paper shows how Dupré uses this mode of fictional representation to develop power relationships between himself as poet and his patron, and between his fictional self and the ladies he interviews. He pays tribute to Marguerite's own poetic achievements, but also creates tensions between the *je*-narrator of the past who was accosted orally by powerful, articulate women, and the *je*-narrator of the present who now commands these voices through the written word. Dupré marries the characteristically medieval narrative voice within the fiction of the *récit* with a characteristically early-modern 'aggressive' first person outside it, who is to be identified with the author himself.

David Cowling's paper looks forward to the national consciousness and religious strife of the later sixteenth century; he describes the satirical work of the French humanist Henri Estienne (1531-98), and in particular his attacks on Italian fashions and linguistic usages at the court of Henri III, and the political, social and economic motives that inspired them. Paradoxically, the protestant Estienne was an exile in Geneva and had no realistic prospect of an immediate return to the court in Paris, but that does not prevent him from putting forward a view of the refined 'French' style of language that is appropriate for courtiers in Paris, as opposed to the 'Italian' influences which he finds both linguistically and morally corrupting.

The volume closes as it began, with a consideration of a court from outside European Christendom, and with an emperor who was himself a poet. Christine Woodhead considers the role of the Ottoman Emperor Murad III (1574-95) as emperor, literary patron and poet. Murad's career began with a period of magnificence and success, but was later beset by increasing military, economic, social and political problems, which were exacerbated by his extreme pursuit of the policy of imperial seclusion. This was reflected both in the organisation of government, in

which members of the emperor's *birun* and *enderun* (outer and inner households) were firmly segregated in the functions they could fulfil, and geographically, in the outer and inner courts of the Topkapı Sarayı palace. After outlining the importance of refined poetry to Ottoman emperors and the (largely Persian) origins from which its conventional genres were derived, Woodhead describes the newer genres of *tezkire* (biographies of poets and scholars) and *şehname* (dynastic chronicle illustrated with painted miniatures). Murad was a particularly lavish patron of the latter, perhaps partly because of its conspicuous expense and the fact that each *şehname* normally existed only in a single copy, which heightened the splendour of his patronage and the mystique surrounding his seclusion. He himself was also a poet with strong links to religious mysticism, but this role sat less easily with his position as emperor, since it tended to subsume any poet's individual voice into a generalised tradition and thus to make the emperor into just another (usually unhappy) man.

In some ways, the Ottoman Murad and the Chinese Xuanzong resemble each other – neither had been the automatic successor to his throne, and both were poets with an interest in mystic religion. Some of the problems they faced were also similar – the need to rely on very few close advisors, the temptation to excessive expenditure on ceremony and warfare, and the problems of holding a huge empire together – but the Ottoman concern for inspiring awe through seclusion prevented Murad from facing these difficulties with anything like the degree of success that Xuanzong had enjoyed. His patronage of other poets might bring him kudos, but his own poetry was confined within conventions that tended to make him anonymous, whereas Xuanzong's verse, like that of European monarchs such as James I and Charles d'Orléans, could make a real contribution to his cultural reputation.

The purpose of this book is to pose and address fundamental questions about the existence of high culture and its literary results within many different societies, and to enable readers to draw their own comparisons between them (although we have, by way of illustration, argued for a number of such comparisons in the course of this introduction). We hope that by examining literary works concerned with life at court, inside and out, reflexively and broadly, this collection will offer a fresh and exciting approach to the subject and a basis for broader discussion in future work.