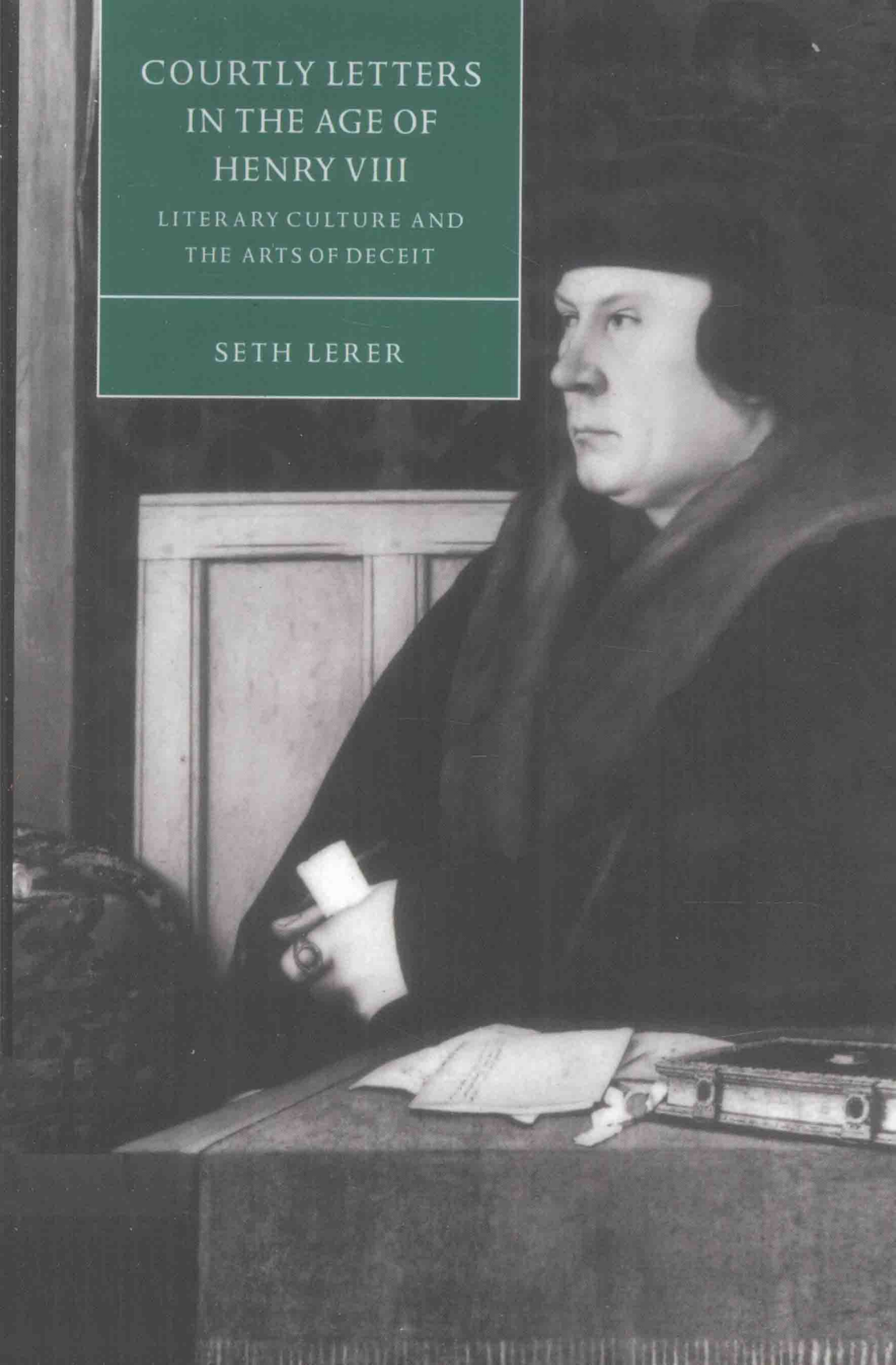
COURTLY LETTERS IN THE AGE OF HENRY VIII

LITERARY CULTURE AND THE ARTS OF DECEIT

SETH LERER



Courtly letters in the age of Henry VIII

Literary culture and the arts of deceit

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This revisionary study of the origins of courtly poetry reveals the culture of spectatorship and voyeurism that shaped early Tudor English literary life. Through new research into the reception of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, it demonstrates how Pandarus became the model of the early modern courtier. His blend of counsel, secrecy, and eroticism informed the behavior of poets, lovers, diplomats, and even Henry VIII himself. In close readings of the poetry of Hawes and Skelton, the drama of the court, the letters of Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn, the writings of Thomas Wyatt, and manuscript anthologies and early printed books, Seth Lerer illuminates a "Pandaric" world of displayed bodies, surreptitious letters, and transgressive performances. In the process, he redraws the boundaries between the medieval and the Renaissance and illustrates the centrality of the verse epistle to the construction of subjectivity.

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Courtly letters in the age of Henry VIII

Hans Holbein, Portrait of Sir Thomas Cromwell.

For my father

What a goddes name, haue ye a boke in your hande? let me se. Nouum testamentum: What, thou deceiuest me / I had wend thou couldest haue skillid of nothing but onli of flateri. But what is this in your bosom? an other boke . . . Abyde, what is here? Troylus & Chreseid? Lord what discord is bitwene these two bokes?

Sir Thomas Elyot, *Pasquil the Playne* (1533)

Acknowledgments

This book began as a sequel to my *Chaucer and His Readers*, and it therefore owes a debt to many of the individuals and institutions that facilitated the writing of that study. The British Library, the Huntington Library, the Bodleian Library, and the libraries of Princeton, Berkeley, and Stanford provided resources and materials. A fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation enabled me to begin work on the present volume, while further financial support and teaching leave from Stanford helped me to complete it.

Portions of the book were presented to audiences at Berkeley, Duke, Notre Dame, the University of Pennsylvania, and Rutgers; to a meeting of the Bay Area Pre- and Early Modern Study Group; and as lectures and colloquia at Washington University, where I had the privilege of serving as the Hurst Visiting Professor in the Winter of 1996. Among those who heard or read material, I single out for special thanks: John Bender, Harry Berger, Mary Bly, Joseph Loewenstein, Patricia Parker, David Riggs, Jennifer Summit, and Steven Zwicker. For support of this project in its earliest stages, I thank R. Howard Bloch, Anthony Grafton, Stephen G. Nichols, and Brian Stock. Joseph Dane had the ability to determine precisely the moments when I was saying just the opposite of what I meant. Timothy Hampton responded fully to an early version of chapter 3 and, in the process, helped me see the larger European scope of my study. Mary F. Godfrey offered valuable commentary throughout the writing of the book. Conversations with Sean Keilen and Bradin Cormack pushed me to refine the exposition and enhance its supporting evidence. Christina Carlson and Deanne Williams secured microfilms of manuscripts. After the book was complete in draft, I had the opportunity to present some of its materials in a graduate seminar at Stanford on early Tudor literature. I am grateful to those students for showing me the implications of my interests and for forcing me to clarify my claims.

Stephen Orgel welcomed this book into the Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture series. But more than that, his presence as a colleague and a friend has enhanced the environment in

which this publication, as well as many of my others, could productively take shape. Josie Dixon has been a model editor and Jonathan Crewe an ideal reader (whose report not only offered incisive suggestions for revision, but also managed to articulate the scope and argument of the book better than I could myself).

A small portion of chapter 2 appears as an article in *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 59 (1996). An early version of some readings now incorporated into chapters 2 and 4 appears as an essay in *The Book and the Body*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe and Dolores Warwick Frese (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1996). Finally, I thank the Huntington Library, the Frick Collection, the British Library, and the Pierpont Morgan Library for permission to reproduce photographs of materials in their collections.

Note on editions and abbreviations

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Chaucer's poetry will be from Larry D. Benson, general editor, *The Riverside Chaucer*, third edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). I have, however, compared the *Riverside* edition of *Troilus and Criseyde* with Barry Windeatt, ed., *Chaucer: Troilus and Criseyde* (London: Longman, 1984), whose readings I occasionally adopt. Quotations from Wyatt's poetry will be from R. A. Rebholz, ed., *Sir Thomas Wyatt, The Complete Poems* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1978). For Skelton: John Scattergood, ed., *John Skelton, The Complete English Poems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). For Stephen Hawes: W. E. Mead, *The Pastime of Pleasure*, EETS original series 173 (London: Oxford University Press, 1928); Florence W. Gluck and Alice B. Morgan, eds., *The Minor Poems*, EETS original series 271 (London: Oxford University Press, 1974). For Tottel's *Miscellany*: Hyder E. Rollins, ed., *Tottel's Miscellany (1557–1587)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2 vols. 1928–29, rev. 1965). The manuscript of Humphrey Wellys, Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson C.813, has been edited by Sharon L. Jansen and Kathleen H. Jordan, *The Welles Anthology* (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1991), and for the most part I rely on their edition (though I spell the name of its compiler as he did, Wellys). All other editions will be cited in full in the notes.

My use of these editions, however, does not necessarily imply that I accept all their readings and redactions. The literature I survey survives in manuscripts and printed books of remarkable textual variability. To some, variation is the mark of unreliability; to others, it is testimony to the creatively fluid nature of the medieval and the early modern text and to the intrusiveness (witting or unwitting) of scribes and readers. This is a book about the history of reading and rewriting, and I have often sought the manuscripts and early printed editions of many of the works I analyze. When I refer to these documents to make a point of textual criticism, or to expose the responses of a historical readership, I cite them

using standard library abbreviations, shelf marks, catalogue references, *Short Title Catalogue* numbers, and foliation or pagination.

Finally, because there is a fair amount of Middle English in this book, I occasionally offer marginal translations of particularly difficult or obscure words in my quotations.

The following abbreviations are used:

EETS OS	Early English Text Society, Original Series
EETS ES	Early English Text Society, Extra Series
MED	*Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath *et al.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1954 –)
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*, ed., James H. A. Murray *et al.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933)
RES	*Review of English Studies*
SAC	*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*
STC	A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave, *A Short Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, and Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475–1640* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1926)
RSTC	The *STC* revised by W. A. Jacobs, F. S. Ferguson, and Katherine F. Panzer, 3 vols. (London: Bibliographical Society, 1976, 1986, 1991)

Contents

Illustrations

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

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

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

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

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

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