Messengers in Later Medieval England

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of MPhil at the University of St Andrews

26 September 2016
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Abstract

Messengers were well acknowledged as a profession in late medieval England, providing a prototype of postal service of later centuries. Yet varied documents other than Exchequer records expose a terminological confusion in the generic term of 'messengers'; as a result, the nature of medieval messengership is not easy to approach. Though messenger activities permeated the kingdom's communication network, information about individual messengers was limited and difficult to track down.

This thesis adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, and explores the nature of messengership in later medieval England mainly in three aspects: the role that messengers played in the English communication network; the messengers’ position in the network of patronage; and the perception of their images in middle English literary works. Built on administrative aspects, Chapter One identifies the social status of the king’s regular messengers and raises the terminological problem in documentation. The chapter continues to adopt the view of administrators, to see how messenger activities in the communication network were influenced by policies, and to cast some light on the medieval sense of information security. Chapter Two examines the symbiotic relation between service and patronage, showing particular interest in the double-edged nature of patronage. Chapter Three turns to the perspective of medieval English writers, focusing on the different approaches applied to the three messenger figures in Chaucer's Book of the Duchess, his Man of Law's Tale, and an unusual romance called Athelston.
Introduction

Medieval messengership is not an easy topic to approach in terms of archival studies. Exchequer records of payments and expenses have indeed established the messengers as a distinct group from at least the thirteenth century in England's central government, whose work provided a prototype of postal service emerging in the sixteenth century. This convinces administrative historians to acknowledge messengers as a valid profession in late medieval England.¹ Yet in Chancery records and miscellaneous chronicles and local documents the appellation of messenger, nuncius in Latin and messager in Middle English and Anglo-Norman, with a long train of variations, presents itself as an ubiquitous phantom: it may lurk anywhere, sparks at certain points, and slips away into a profound and often obscure background. The sporadic nature of its presence is well mirrored in Middle English literary works. The impression of messengers announcing news provided a convenient rhetorical trope to vivify the verses. Scenes of message delivery are frequently used, and messengers are observed extensively playing walk-on parts in all types of tales. Various services of historical messengers were evidenced by documents, but we lack portraits of individual identities. Though messenger activities permeated the kingdom's communication network, information about individual messengers was limited and sometimes ambiguous. It is difficult to track down a certain messenger

especially when he had a common name.

The word 'messenger' itself also takes on a generic feature. When the appellation comes up in a document, it is not always straightforward to tell if the person was a fully privileged messenger serving the king, a courier working on foot, a non-royal messenger serving a prestigious lord, a common messenger working for a town, an agent on behalf of a religious house, or maybe an *ad hoc* messenger carrying out a special task. The nature of messengership is shrouded in its terminological complexity, entangling with many social, economical, and political connotations. Despite their diverse duties, disparate social backgrounds, and rather ambiguous indication of professional positions, those varied messengers, whose shadows were captured in parchment, could still be studied as a social group in prosopography, since all messengers played two fundamental roles: 1) as a bearer of messages, either written or oral, and 2) as an agent of certain people or institutions. These two roles made messengers crucial, though often indiscernible, to the whole scheme of a kingdom's communication network.

In this thesis I intend to grope for the nature of messengership in later medieval England mainly in three aspects: the role that messengers played in the English communication network, their position in the network of patronage, and the perception of their images in literary works. The time span covers from the reign of Henry III to the time of Henry VI, depending on the availability of specific documents. The geographical scope is confined to England, due to word limits, and as a result envoys and ambassadors, personnel employed in diplomacy will not be included this study.
Within the group of messengers, since no agency of messengers could compete with the king’s messengers in terms of documentation and political prominence, my primary focus naturally falls on those nuncii regis. Household records relating to king’s messengers scatter in all aspects. My major interest is to search the calendar entries on the Close Rolls and the Patent Rolls for grants, policies, and also political struggles engaging the messengers, and have tried to track down certain individual messengers to map their life and relationship with the Crown. In addition to the miscellaneous household records, which were extensively consulted by Mary C. Hill to establish the messengers as a separable section in the king's household as well as in his governance, I have also consulted records in Ancient Petitions (SC 8) and Parliament Rolls (SC 9), to see the messengers' personal concerns and their interaction with other political entities. Interesting and illustrative cases are occasionally found in chronicles and in a variety of secondary works, not restricted to royal messengers. Ordinances and regulations of households, the Red and the Black Books of the Exchequer, and local letter books have all helped in understanding the administrative aspects.

Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, I have also looked into Middle English literary works to see how the terminology and the role that it carried were perceived by medieval writers.

The first chapter examines the most basic aspects of medieval messengership and goes on to explore the role that messengers played in the English communication network. Based on historians’ administrative studies concerning the king's household, attention is first drawn to the social status of household messengers, both within the household and within the messenger
group itself. The chapter continues to adopt the view of administrators who exercised control over the communication network, to see how messenger activities were influenced by policies, and to cast some light on the medieval sense of information security. The second chapter explores the symbiotic relation between service and patronage. Good service deserved rewards, and generous rewards stimulated further dedication. This common logic concerning the exercise of patronage works well on messengers, but ignores the double-edged nature of patronage. This chapter shows a particular interest in both benefits and hazards that came along with messengership. The final chapter turns to the perspective of medieval writers. It first focuses on Chaucer's different approaches towards the messenger scenes in the Book of the Duchess and in the Man of Law's Tale, spotting the narrative complexity achieved via his manipulation of messenger scenes. Then the chapter provides a discussion on the Middle English romance Athelson, an unusual poem containing five messengers, and examines the extensive realistic touch regarding the seemingly anomalous subplot, which shapes the lowly messenger as a middle-class hero and superimposes it upon a courtly setting. The Athelston-poet's surprising familiarity with messengership probably suggests an insider's view. The three chapters thus incorporate into an interdisciplinary study on medieval messengership in England.
Chapter I

Messengership

Documentation on non-royal messengers is rare. Yet traces of this business are still discernible. In a letter written on 7 August 1465, John Paston mentioned to his cousin Margaret Paston how letters were brought to him and sent away. 'The berer of this lettir', he said, was a 'comon carier'. A few days before, this messenger was in Norwich, where a letter for John Paston was committed to him.¹ The Pastons, as John Hare notices, based themselves at inns while in London. When they were away, the inns would forward undelivered messages and parcels to them.² The letter was indeed 'wretyn at London', and apparently John had planned to send it to Margaret at Heylisdoune by the same messenger. John clearly understood how common messengers worked as a group, and that the letter might be passed on to someone else, and eventually would be forwarded to Heylisdoune within the week.³ This messenger belonged to a group known as common messengers, who usually worked in the service of a city or a town. Their condition of wealth varied. By the fourteenth century London had a number of common messengers in its service. Yet no record has ever specified the financial structure of their payments: it is not known if those common messengers were paid in part by the city council, or if they were completely independent of any institution.⁴

A letter close issued in August 1315 suggests a different scene in daily life that

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³ Davis, ed., p. 139.
⁴ Hill, King’s Messengers, p. 151.
certain people might come to larger households to volunteer themselves as *ad hoc* messengers. When I refer to someone as an *ad hoc* messenger, I mean that this messenger accepted contingent tasks, earning extra money to augment his profits, but not hiring out his service as a professional messenger who made deliveries for a living. According to this writ messengers and couriers were not allowed to enter the houses 'unless they carry their lord's mail or bear a message to the lord of the house'. That is to say, normal delivery could be carried out, but no one should actively seek to make a delivery. The prohibition might result from some lords' or ladies' complaint about a congestion of impoverished people seeking opportunities to serve them, with an expectation of some money or gifts in return. For professional messengers, who took up messengership as an occupation, the lords might have their own ways of summoning messengers to assign work.

*Becoming a king’s messenger*

Just as Mary Hill indicates, even if all the evidence of common messengers (probably also with that of *ad hoc* messengers) were placed together, it was still negligible: no outside agency of messengers could compete with 'the monopoly of the king’s messengers'.

By the time of Henry III, becoming a messenger of the king was taking up an office in the king’s household, known as either *nuncius regis* (messenger of the king) or *cursor* (runner). These two names indicate a two-layered appearance regarding the structure of the group, which is yet to confuse us for the moment. A *nuncius* was a messenger equipped with a horse, and mostly the horse was his own

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Messengership

property. A cursor, or courier, however, just as his title suggests, was a lesser messenger working on foot, for he was probably not wealthy enough to afford a horse. A drawing is found in an Exchequer book dated 1360 that recorded expenses of envoys, depicting a mounted messenger accompanied by a footman, who is very likely to be a courier.\textsuperscript{7} Both of the men were in livery, and they wore small pouches, probably letter pouches, at their sides. The livery and the letter pouch were provided for them.\textsuperscript{8} Messengers’ duties were multifarious. Primarily, messengers provided a regular channel for the king and his subjects to perform administrative work. A regular duty of king’s messengers was to deliver king’s writs to localities, bringing orders and instructions to the hands of sheriffs and bailiffs. Bishops or noblemen were also in frequent touch with the king via messengers, but prestigious lords and great households usually had their own private messengers to employ. Overseas delivery was often made as well. Sometimes the messenger working abroad might be assigned a secret task of spying. On the other hand, foreign envoys and messengers in England would be treated as potential spies, and therefore, sending domestic messengers to escort them would be an effective way to keep them watched. Messengers might also need to carry valuables and money; but in peacetime the practice of transporting a large amount of money could be avoided by sending Exchequer tallies instead.\textsuperscript{9} Messengers were also responsible for making various types of royal proclamations, and by doing so they were sometimes effectively disseminating political

\textsuperscript{7} TNA, E 101/309/11. The image is presented in the Image Library of the National Archives, see: <https://images.nationalarchives.gov.uk/assetbank-nationalarchives/action/viewAsset?id=19094> [accessed 1 Jan 2017]

\textsuperscript{8} Hill, \textit{King’s Messengers}, p. 41.

\textsuperscript{9} Hill, \textit{King’s Messengers}, p. 87-104.
propaganda.\textsuperscript{10} When the king was to summon a parliament, knights were usually informed by proclamations, and messengers were sent out to magnates with writs of summons.\textsuperscript{11}

King’s messengers were usually selected from three sources. The first and best way was to grant the office to an experienced messenger who had been working in another noble household or a prestigious religious establishment, where he had received the necessary training and demonstrated his capability and integrity for the post. The second way was to choose from the servants or serjeants serving the royal household in other posts. The third way was to promote a courier, who was already serving the messenger system as a lesser messenger.\textsuperscript{12}

For those who were selected in the first way, working in the king’s household would naturally be regarded as more advanced and more honoured than serving a magnate or a bishop. The second method sometimes also provided, similar to the third way in effect, an opportunity for advancement, as a lesser household servant might achieve a higher status with a greater amount of wages and usually easier access to the king. Before Richard Savage began to work as a messenger of the Exchequer in 1445, he had served the household as a groom of the buttery.\textsuperscript{13} The rank of a groom, who was also known as \textit{garçon}, belonged to the lowest stratum among the domestic staff in the late medieval elite households.\textsuperscript{14} The position of

\textsuperscript{11} PROME, ‘Edward III: November 1355’; \textit{CCR}, 1354-60, p. 233.
\textsuperscript{12} Hill, \textit{King’s Messengers}, p. 121.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{CCR}, 1441-46, p. 393; \textit{CCR}, 1446-52, p. 153. The buttery was one of nine purveying offices, responsible for wine and beer. See Chris Given-Wilson, \textit{The Royal Household and the King’s Affinity: service, politics and finance in England 1360-1413} (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 44.
messengers, as it will be elaborated in the next section, though deviating according to individuals, was generally no lower than the level of most yeomen. It is certainly not safe to assume that every such appointment was an undoubted promotion. For example, John Papenham was an usher of the Receipt of the Exchequer before he was appointed as one of Richard II's messengers. The usher of the Receipt was 'nominally unpaid', which prevents a comparison of status through the level of remuneration, yet the usher was no doubt an important office for the security of the Treasury. John Ferrou, one of the purveyors, was promised an office of 'being one of the yeoman-messengers of the Exchequer' as soon as a vacancy occurred. Despite the heavy and recurrent criticisms against them from unfortunate vendors during the fourteenth century, purveyors played, indeed, a vital role in feeding the entire household and in its financial system. It was also a convenient position where corruption might take place. On the other hand, Gower Thomas, messenger of the queen, Anne of Bohemia, was granted the office of purveyor at the Tower of London in 1386. Both directions of transfer existed, and no indication of promotion or demotion could be ascertained in either case. Therefore, it is hard, not only in theory but also in practical cases, to sort these offices -- messenger, usher of the Lower Exchequer, and purveyor -- in terms of importance or royal favour. Nevertheless, in spite of the hierarchical perplexity of the personnel divisions within the king's household, these appointments, including the promise of a future appointment, do reveal to us the reputation of good work

15 CPR, 1389-92, p.155.
17 CPR, 1441-46, p. 419.
18 Given-Wilson, Royal Household, pp. 41-8.
and the royal confidence that the messengers had won.

*The status of king's messengers and the terminological complexity*

In order to define the position of messengers in the king’s household, the political centre of the hierarchical medieval England, two aspects will be involved. First, we need to pin down the stratum to which the royal messengers belonged in the household. Second, we will also examine the hierarchy within their own group.

The first aspect requires a perspective of externality, which takes the messengers as an integral group and draws comparisons with other groups of domestic servants. One effective indicator of the importance of an office is the rate of wages paid to the personnel. Wages were not the only source of income for the servants, but the arrangement of wages has left us clear footprints to trace down the household hierarchy, as the rates were by and large set at six distinguishable levels. Food, drinks and other necessities were provided accordingly as well, but a look at the wages alone would be sufficient to give a sense of relative rank.

Take Edward II’s household as an example. At the top was the group of chief officers, ‘figures of national importance’ -- the chamberlain, treasurer, steward, controller, and keeper of the privy seal, usually receiving ‘substantial fees ranging from 8 marks to £20 a year in rent’.20 The second level is marked by serjeants-at-arms, who received 12d a day ‘quaunt ils serrount en court issint’ (if they should be made to leave the court), but 8d a day if they remained in court 'en le seruise le roy' (in the service of the king). The next two levels were characterized by two different groups of serjeants. The relatively superior group was paid 7½d per day and provided with two sets of clothes per year or an

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20 Given-Wilson, *Royal Household*, p. 11; Woolgar, p. 31.
equivalence of 46s 8d. Most esquires shared the same rate with this group. The other group of serjeants would receive 4½d per day and two sets of clothes per year or 40s. The fifth level, represented by valets of the offices, was generally given no more than 2d per day, with one set of clothes or one mark a year, plus 4s 8d for the purchase of shoes. The grooms were in the lowest rank, receiving 1½d per day. These rates did not change significantly in the fifteenth century. The ordinances of 1445 and 1454 also provide a vivid paradigm of hierarchy within the offices. In general, a certain division was topped by serjeants, followed by yeomen, or valets (‘valletz’ in Anglo-Norman), then grooms, and pages at the bottom.

For messengers, the nature of their wage gradually changed during the fourteenth century. It first functioned as a compensatory payment, aiming to cover the days that the messengers spent waiting in the court, and later turned into a remuneration that resembled a salary in the modern sense. However, a dichotomous feature still remained that messengers were paid differently during work and during waiting. When the Parliament of 1376, later known as the Good Parliament, was prorogued to 28 April, Issue Roll records show that messengers were paid to deliver the writs of prorogation to the related lords and sheriffs. Tasks for each messenger were assigned respectively and were recorded on the roll on 5 February. Among the king’s messengers, John Cook (also Cok, or Coke), John Elyot, and William Hardyng received their payments, ranging from one mark

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21 Thomas Frederick Tout, The Place of the Reign of Edward II in English History (Manchester: University Press, 1914), pp. 270-314. The regulation of lodging in the 1318 ordinance seems to be suggesting the existence of another rank above the serjeants-at-arms, in terms of wages, as they were paid slightly higher at 15d a day, though I have not found any specific office paid at this rate in the same document. See Tout, p. 305; and Woolgar, pp. 31-2.


23 Hill, King’s Messengers, pp. 46-7.
to more than £1, for the specific work they carried out. In October 1376 the three messengers, together with another messenger named John Noseley (also Noslee, or Nowesle), were granted 4½d a day when they were in the office but 'not labouring' at the king's cost.

The rate also changed over time, generally with an upward tendency until the end of Edward III's reign. Messengers of Edward I in the late thirteenth century only received ½d a day, but towards the end of his reign, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, they were granted a more generous wage of 3d a day. Twenty-four archers on foot ('archers a pee'), identified by Tout as 'Yeoman del Garde', were also paid 3d a day in Edward II's time. Towards the end of Edward III's reign, a messenger enjoyed 4½d a day, and the rate remained unchanged in Richard II's time and mostly in the fifteenth century. Messengers in Edward IV's household would receive 3d a day if attending the court, but 5d a day 'as other yomen of houshold' if they were sent out on business. Yet messengers might get more in certain political situations when the king had a greater or more frequent reliance on them. According to the ordinance of 1347, Edward III's messengers were paid 6d a day in time of war. In time of peace, one might naturally expect a lower payment, though it was not specified in the same document whether they should receive 4½d per diem, as suggested above; the allowance of their livery clothes in peacetime was indicated at the rate of 1 mark (13s 8d) 'by yere' and for

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24 E 175/25. PROME, Appendix 1376.
25 CPR, 1374-77, p. 351.
26 Hill, King's Messengers, pp. 48-9; Tout, p. 304. However, a letter patent issued in 1262 shows that John de Rotheby, messenger of Henry III, was offered an 'alm' of 1½d a day. This may contradict Hill's observation of wage rates in the later thirteenth century, but the 'alms' were likely to rely on specific conditions of individuals and were granted under a different system from the wages. See CPR, 1258-66, p. 241.
27 Tout, p. 304.
shoes it was 4s 8d every year. In brief, if we trim the timeline to the fourteenth century only, messengers were paid 3d per day at the beginning, and later 4½d with 1 mark yearly for clothes and 4s 8d for shoes. If we then compare the rates of messengers with the five levels, it is logical to set the messengers between the fourth and fifth groups, probably with an inclination to the fourth, since the messengers were mostly aligned with the yeomen in terms of payment. According to the ordinance of 1347, for example, the 20 messengers were given the same amount for liveries (clothes and shoes) as the 12 yeomen of the king's chamber and the 70 yeomen of offices in the household. Therefore, the rank of messengers was most likely to be reckoned in the lower middle -- lower than the esquires and serjeants of some offices (or the 'upper group' of serjeants in Woolgar's term), higher than lesser servants such as valets and grooms, and frequently alongside the yeomen. We will hold this provisional conclusion for a while, before we move on and encounter the perplexity of household titles in other documents.

The second aspect offers a view into the messenger group itself. Messengers in the king's household could be generally divided into two levels as they were documented under different names: fully-privileged and mounted nuncii, and unmounted cursores or cokini. However, the mention of 'messengers' in the two aforesaid documents, the household ordinance of 1347 and the Liber Niger of Edward IV's household, was referring only to the mounted and superior group. In the first case the number of messengers was mentioned at 20, when Edward III's household probably enjoyed a group of 21 nuncii regis and more than 30

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29 Collection of Ordinances, pp. 9-11.
30 Hill, King's Messengers, p. 17.
31 Note the range of alternative spellings for the term 'messengers': 'messingers', 'messagers', and 'messeagers'.
The number of messengers in Edward IV’s household was reduced to four, according to the Liber Niger, from the twelve ‘in the noble Edwardes [i.e., Edward II’s] houshold ... by the avoydance of priuie seale from houshold’. Apparently cursores were not included here, either. There was no specific section dedicated to the couriers, nor were they listed alongside the nuncii -- they were merely not thought of. Such omissions correspond with the strikingly limited entries of couriers documented in the Calendars of Patent Rolls and Close Rolls, where material benefits, such as grants of rewards and gifts, could be recognised, given that the number of couriers was seldom lower than that of mounted messengers in the king’s household, suggesting a rather marginal status of the couriers.

The humbler status of the couriers could also be discerned easily from their lower rate of wage, in addition to their rare appearance in records relating to grant of rewards and their simpler working condition -- usually carrying dispatches without a horse that was their own property. As discussed before, nuncii of Edward I were granted a daily wage of 3d at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Cursores of the same time were paid 2d a day, two thirds of nuncii’s wage. When a nuncius enjoyed 4½d a day towards the end of Edward III’s reign, a cursor would receive 2d to 3d as his daily wage. Besides, the possibility of being promoted from a courier to a messenger also confirmed the superior status of

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32 See 'Appendix I: the Numbers of Messengers Employed', in Hill’s King’s Messengers, p. 142. Although no precise data is extracted for the year 1347, the numbers of nuncii regis during 1340-2 and 1350-4 remained steady at 21, and the figures of cursores were 46 in 1340-2 and 30 in 1350-4, not dramatically dropped. Therefore, it is safe to infer that the couriers were not counted in the number recorded in the ordinance.

33 Myers, ed., The Household of Edward IV, p. 133.

34 For the figures of messenger employment in the fourteenth century, see 'Appendix I' in Hill’s book, pp. 141-2.

35 Hill, King’s Messengers, p. 47.
being a *nuncius*. William Brancepath, courier of the chamber, was appointed as messenger of the chamber in April 1387.\textsuperscript{36} Therefore, *cursores* also provided a pool of well-trained candidates for future *nuncii regis*, if any of them could manage to accumulate enough money to buy a horse. This was not easy at all, and it was more likely that they might receive one as a personal gift by royal favour.

Hill's establishment of the two-graded messenger system in the king's household, however, only provides a primary frame. Messengers serving different divisions might gain various degrees of dignity and privileges. We might expect a 'messenger of the chamber' to enjoy more intimacy and confidence from the king, compared to one who held a more general title of 'messenger of the household'. Certain compounded or mixed references to messengers suggest an even subtler, sometimes confusing, stratification among those superior messengers. Edmund Kent was referred to as a 'groom-messenger' in February 1398 and one year later as a 'messenger of the chamber'.\textsuperscript{37} John Swyllyngton in Henry VI's household was registered as the 'Yoman Messenger' of the counting house.\textsuperscript{38} Edward IV's household maintained the practice of setting a yeoman in the counting house as a messenger, who 'shold be redy horsed and lodged nyghe, to serue suche erandez as the countyng-hous woll send hym in'.\textsuperscript{39} Some were also called serjeants. Robert de Wyrksop and John de Watson, for example, were referred to, at the same time, as 'the king's serjeants and messengers' in 1339.\textsuperscript{40} To make it even more perplexing, John Rypon, 'the king's serjeant' who worked as 'yeoman-messenger of

\textsuperscript{36} CPR, 1385-89, p. 290. The alternative spellings of his surname appeared to be *Brauncepath*, *Branspath*, *Branspathe*, and *Braunspath*.
\textsuperscript{37} CPR, 1396-99, pp. 277, 510.
\textsuperscript{38} Collection of Ordinances, p. *19*.
\textsuperscript{39} Myers, ed., *The Household of Edward IV*, p. 159.
\textsuperscript{40} CPR, 1338-40, pp. 358-9.
the chamber’ was promised a grant of office of serjeant-at-arms in 1448.\textsuperscript{41}

Esquires could also be associated. William Brancepath, who had started serving in the messenger system as a courier but later acquired a title of 'esquire of the chamber' by 1396, was still carrying out some message service for Richard II, as the king ‘send [him] beyond the seas and into divers parts of the realm as his messenger’.\textsuperscript{42} George Felbrigg, also holding a title of esquire of the chamber, was generously rewarded for his 'good service, especially as the king's messenger beyond seas' in 1384.\textsuperscript{43} Even serjeants-at-arms, the group of officers who probably occupied the second level of king’s servants and in theory were paid nearly 3 times higher than messengers, were occasionally sent out to serve as a messenger. For instance, Simon Blakebourne, serjeant-at-arms, was sent out on a journey in 1403 'as the king's messenger on certain business of the king'.\textsuperscript{44} Another serjeant-at-arms, whose name is not given in the calendar entry, probably due to its illegibility in the original roll, was commissioned in April 1412 to carry out political proclamations with John Seweale (or Sewale), a traceable king's messenger receiving a daily wage of 4½$d$.\textsuperscript{45} John Seweale later worked in pair with another well-documented messenger Nicholas Auncell, when making proclamations in July of the same year. Nicholas Auncell and the nameless serjeant-at-arms could not be the same person, given that the former's wage was only set at 4½$d$ a day as John Seweale, while a serjeant-at-arms might receive 8$d$ or 12$d$ a day.\textsuperscript{46} Therefore, it confirms that the anonymous serjeant-at-arms in this

\textsuperscript{41} CPR, 1446-52, p. 185.
\textsuperscript{42} CPR, 1396-99, p. 152.
\textsuperscript{43} CPR, 1381-85, p. 367.
\textsuperscript{44} CPR, 1401-1405, p. 360.
\textsuperscript{45} CPR, 1408-13, p. 213, 428.
\textsuperscript{46} CPR, 1396-99, p. 4; CPR, 1408-13, p. 432.
case was indeed fulfilling the duty of a king's messenger.

Such a hotchpotch of appellations suggests at least two facts. Synchronically speaking, first of all, the standing of king's messengers covered varied strata ranging from the lowest one of grooms to the much higher ones of serjeants and esquires. Such heterogeneity of standing was not uncommon among other groups of household servants. The title of yeomen was also shared among men of diverse status. Serjeants were paid at two different levels, according to the divisions they served, though the title generally applied to both groups, as already mentioned. Second, it was possible for a king's servant to wear more than one hat. It could result from an overlap of certain duties, or it could be due to the sinecure or honourable nature of certain positions. It was not impossible that Edmund Kent, the once groom-messenger in 1398, was doing the work of a groom as well as that of a messenger at the time. In Richard II's household, a dozen yeomen of the chamber actually served in other capacities, among which messengers were one option. At least three yeomen served Richard II as royal messengers, two of whom were even 'involved in very sensitive negotiations'. The Liber Niger of Edward IV's household also mentions 'go[ing] messagez' as part of the four chamber yeomen's work.

The term 'messengers' seems to have been applied in accordance with the service provided, more associated with the person's specific duty, rather than asserting one's status. The titles of knights and esquires, which articulated their advanced standing, provide an illuminating contrast. The king indeed had his own

48 Gillespie, pp. 321, 324.
49 Myers, ed., The Household of Edward IV, p. 117.
group of regular men who served him as professional messengers, but it is still possible to witness servants in other capacities being denominated as king's messengers in document entries. Even noblemen could be conveniently referred to by such an ad hoc title under specific circumstances. In September 1346, for instance, a group of 'messages nostre dit seignur le roi' (i.e., messengers of Edward III) came to the Parliament from Calais to announce the king's actions and intentions. Messengers in this group included Sir Bartholomew Burghersh, Sir John Darcy, king's chamberlain, and Master John Thoresby, Lord Privy Seal. It is natural to find that verbal reference to 'king's messengers' in relevant documents, though 'not used indiscriminately', was not so strictly exclusive to the 'king's own regular men' as Hill has expected. Therefore, although there were indeed a group of regular messengers attending the king's household, taking the title of messenger appearing in documents at face value could cause some problem. When a person appears in a calendar entry as 'king's messenger', we must be aware of the broad nature of this convenient appellation and the difficulty to determine, if no other knowledge is offered, whether he was a regular man who only served in the royal messenger system, or a versatile household servant who was fortuitously carrying out a messenger's duty, or even a random person of high rank who happened to be entrusted with a special task. Nevertheless, there is still one thing for sure: all messengers in the royal household were male. There might be occasions when a lady or a maid helped passing a word or sending a writ, but no female figure, regardless of her status, was ever referred to as a messenger in royal household records.

50 PROME, Edward III: September 1346; C 65/12.
51 Hill, King's Messengers, p. 12.
Arrangement of posts

In an age without technology of telecommunication, the success of long-distance information exchange largely rested on the dedication of message-bearers. Despite the remarkable speed that a horse could provide, one man working with a single horse could hardly guarantee a swift delivery of messages. A horse indeed ran fast when covering a short distance; yet for long journeys the messenger had to rest his horse frequently, if he had no access to fresh horses during the journey. For routine work a messenger would take a leisurely pace at about 20 to 25 miles a day, which was not higher than the speed of a messenger on foot with better stamina.\(^{52}\)

Such slowness was not helpful for a sensible king to achieve administrative efficiency, especially not producing advantage in war times. A commonly adopted solution was to allow messengers to take fresh horses at regular intervals. Horses could be hired from hackneymen in major towns along the frequently travelled routes in late medieval England. Yet access to local horses was not always regular and prompt, which might hinder the process of royal business. On 18 June 1372, days before the battle of La Rochelle, the bailiffs of Canterbury were threatened by Edward III’s ‘strict order’ that if they would ‘save themselves harmless’, they should ensure that any of the king’s messengers coming from overseas with letters or reports would be able to hire hackneys at a reasonable price so as to ride to Rochester with full speed. Another order was sent to the bailiffs of Rochester, presumably written in the same harsh tone, asking them to guarantee hackney provision from Rochester to London.\(^{53}\) This arrangement set up two intervals

\(^{52}\) Hill, *King’s Messengers*, p. 108. It seems that Hill’s estimation of speed is made as an average for a regular delivery in medieval England, regardless of weather, seasons or geographical difference.

\(^{53}\) CCR, 1369-74, p. 389.
between the coast and London, and allowed the messengers to keep a high speed by means of changing fresh horses. With Aquitaine under threat Edward III must have been in urgent need of express delivery for military and diplomatic reporting.\(^{54}\)

Again in May 1373, injunctions were sent to arrange a slightly more elaborate plan of relay stages, including Dover, Canterbury, Rochester, and Southwark. Beale interprets this series of instructions as a repetition of the earlier one, which may imply a lack of 'decisive action' from the bailiffs.\(^{55}\) Beale's suggestion of ineffectiveness is questionable, mainly because of two reasons. On the one hand, the later writs were issued nearly one year after. If the king was expecting urgent messages in June 1372 while the bailiffs failed to arrange relay horses in time and the king's business was delayed as a result, it is unlikely that the orders were not repeated until May of the following year. If similar records written shortly after 18 June 1372 should be found, Beale's interpretation would appear more convincing. On the other hand, the later writs resembled the earlier ones only in format. The instructions of 1373 added the town of Southwark as a new relay point, since its name was not mentioned at all in the writs of 1372, where the bailiffs of Rochester were told to ensure the speedy riding directly 'to the city of London'. Southwark did not provide a preferable place for refreshment in earlier times. The first reference to a Southwark inn is found in 1338.\(^{56}\) In 1343 when Jack (or John) Faukes, messenger of Edward III, travelled from London to Dover, and later back


\(^{55}\) Beale, p. 40.

from overseas to London, he took no rest nor fresh horses in Southwark.\textsuperscript{57} Royal messengers probably maintained the same practice on the London-Dover route until 1373 when Southwark was added between London and Rochester, which suggests the growth of the town. By 1381 Southwark had attracted 22 innkeepers according to the poll tax lists.\textsuperscript{58} In June 1396 an order from Richard II to related sheriffs and mayors, as a response to a petition from two hackney men, settled a series of standard prices for horse hiring between towns, which included the rates for riding from Southwark to Rochester, from Rochester to Canterbury, and from Canterbury to Dover.\textsuperscript{59} This record evinces that Southwark by then provided a regular stage for horse relays along the London-Dover route.

Another distinction of Edward III’s 1373 instructions lies in the indication of both directions regarding the delivery of messages. The 1373 writs intended to facilitate prompt information transmission from overseas and outwards as well, while the 1372 ones only cared for the homebound journey. Therefore, the king’s writs of 1373 were unlikely a simple repetition of the previous ones. The new instructions might be in accordance with a different stage of war, when the king was again in need of a large amount of urgent deliveries and made an effort to avoid possible delay. Yet it might be true that Edward III’s measures taken in 1372 were not effective enough, despite his threatening tone. Certain bailiffs probably had defended themselves with the excuses of uncooperative hackney men, or simply by saying that spare horses were not always available, since in the writs of

\textsuperscript{57} Mary C. Hill, ‘Jack Faukes, King’s Messenger, and His Journey to Avignon in 1343’, \textit{The English Historical Review}, 225 (1946), 19-30 (pp. 25-7). But when Faukes returned from Rochester to London, he had an extra horse change in Dartford, which suggests that hackney service was also provided in smaller towns along the route, though not necessarily used by messengers.
\textsuperscript{58} Hare, p. 485. Carlin, p. 193.
1373 a little more was added to what was formulated before: the king’s business should not be ‘delayed by default or neglect of the said bailiffs or by excessive hire of hackneys’, and the bailiffs should even ‘[compel] keepers of hackneys so to do if need be’. The reluctance of local bailiffs or hackneymen to cooperate in Edward III’s time might also correspond to a different stage of war. Heavy taxation, extensive demands on purveyance and protracted payment defaults had caused a great burden on the southern towns for some twenty years before the 1360 Treaty of Calais, and such memory might have been brought fresh soon after the nine-year respite.

The use of relay was apparently not an improvised invention of Edward III. In November 1303, for the sake of ‘certain affairs that he has much at heart’, probably concerning the war in Scotland, Edward I sent William Clerk, a wardrobe courier, to Ireland. In a series of writs the king asked the justice of Chester, the constable of Conway Castle, and the justice of North Wales to provide William a ‘speedy and safe passage to those parts at the courier’s cost’. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, both nuncii and cursores were serving in the royal messenger system; yet generally speaking, the unmounted couriers were cheaper and unprivileged, while those trusted and privileged nuncii were ‘always used for responsible tasks’. During 1303 to 1304, the number of nuncii regis in Edward I’s household reached seventeen, the highest of his reign. Even so, Edward I still entrusted William the wardrobe courier with the task to Ireland, and apparently

60 CCR, 1369-74, p. 505.
62 CCR, 1302-07, p. 62. The writs were issued from Cambuskenneth Abbey, Stirling.
63 Hill, King’s Messengers, pp. 15-6.
64 Hill, Appendix I, in King’s Messengers, p. 141. The number of cursores for the same period was 28.
he was provided with horses throughout the journey. It would seem that the courier, because of his outstanding service, had won the king's trust and favour over his superiors; alternatively, perhaps the king had an excessive amount of correspondence to send at this time, and was running out of messengers of a higher class. Besides, regarding the expense of horse hiring, which was said to be at the courier's own cost, no further record is found to tell whether the payment was later reimbursed or not.

The first addressee of the writs was the justice of Chester, yet Chester could hardly have been the first station of the relay, given that Cambuskenneth was the place of issue. The lack of acknowledgement between Stirling and Chester therefore implies the existence of an easier access to horses along the route, probably at regular intervals. It might thus attest Hill's theory, to some extent, that Edward I 'is believed to have set up posting stations on the road between London and Scotland'.\footnote{Hill, \textit{King's Messengers}, pp. 108-9.} If we take a look again at the 1343 case of Jack Faukes, messenger of Edward III, his smooth travel from London to Dover via Rochester and Canterbury in a single day suggests that relay horses along the London-Dover route were also easy to hire at that time.\footnote{Hill, 'Jack Faukes', pp. 25-7.}

Such facility posed a contrast to the difficulty and anxiety reflected in Edward III's instructions of 1372 and 1373, which reveals a certain degree of instability in the English communication network at the time. The speed of king's messengers had to rely on local cooperation. This problem probably extended into the reign of Richard II. For example, in 1394 Walter Beccles, messenger of the Chamber, was issued a writ of aid that authorised him to 'arrest and take, within liberties and
without, except in the fee of the church, horses necessary for the despatch of the king's affair in England, at the king's charges’.\footnote{CPR, 1391-96, p. 700.} In order to support the messengers with sufficient horses Edward III and Richard II took different measures: Edward III’s writs were instructions to engage and rely on his bailiffs, with whose assistance the messenger might quickly continue with his business; yet Richard II’s writs were in the form of letters patent, which directly empowered the messenger to exercise the king’s authority. This transformation in administrative practices probably suggests the growth of hackney men’s business, as a result of which Richard II’s messengers could easily find horses to hire. It is also possible that hackney men were still hard to regularise, but by granting the writs Richard II extended the scope of the messengers’ choice: he approved his messengers to require compulsory service from any houses or individuals, except for the fee of churches.

The later monarchs made no attempt to take complete control of the relay stages along the English network, either, until the time of Edward IV. It is said that during the Anglo-Scottish war in 1482 Edward IV appointed 'a single horseman for every twenty miles, by means of whom travelling with the utmost speed and not passing their respective limits', and therefore letters could be delivered 'from hand to hand 200 miles within two days'. Richard III followed his brother's practice.\footnote{Stone, ed., pp. 1-2.} Although the English communication network in the fourteenth century was not able to compete in terms of scale and efficiency with the medieval European one developed by the Italian mercantile community, or the extraordinary jamchi (or yam) and chidebeo systems of the Mongol Empire, the cooperative nature of the
English one effectively protected the English monarchs from the heavy fiscal burden of infrastructural establishment and maintenance, as well as of human resources.\textsuperscript{69} Although the Yorkist kings had made efforts in their times, the first English postal network that was completely in the royal control and ‘comparable in efficiency and reliability with those of Italy or Habsburg empire’, however, had to wait until the reign of Henry VIII.\textsuperscript{70}

The control over the communication network

In 1467 William Herbert captured a messenger in Wales from Margaret of Anjou. The intercepted letter seems to have revealed a treachery: Richard Neville, earl of Warwick, was involved in a Lancastrian plot.\textsuperscript{71} This case provides a typical example for effectual interception of information taking place in the communication network.

From the perspective of an administrator the Crown could achieve a strict control of the network by censoring certain letters, especially those coming from

\textsuperscript{69} For an introduction to the courier system developed by Italian merchants and innkeepers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, see Mark Brayshay, ‘Post-hast by post horse?’, \textit{History Today}, 9 (1992), 35-41 (pp. 37-8). For a brief introduction to the Mongol postal system, see John D. Langlois Jr, \textit{China Under Mongol Rule} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 43-4. The \textit{jamchi} (Mongolian; or 站赤 zhanchi in Mandarin Chinese) system was mainly used for political proclamations and for receiving envoys and officials; the stationed personnel were basically local residents providing corvée labour. In addition to the \textit{jamchi} system, the Mongols also developed a \textit{chidebeo} (Mongolian; or 急递鋪 jidipu in Mandarin Chinese) system, inherited from the Song Dynasty. The \textit{chidebeo} system served military purposes, setting intervals at every ten, fifteen, or twenty-five \textit{li} (equivalent to half a kilometre), and making five soldiers stationed at each point. The highest speed that a most urgent delivery could reach is approximately 10.36 mph, as the message could travel four hundred \textit{li} (approximately two hundred kilometres) during daytime. Also see Yan Xing, \textit{Zhonghua youzheng fazhan shi} (History of the expansion of China’s postal service) (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan, 1994), p. 166-8.


overseas. On 2 April 1325, Edward II sent an order under the secret seal to Robert de Kendale, constable of Dover, to impose a strict control on messengers from France, especially those from his queen. Queen Isabella arrived in Paris before mid-March to seek for a new truce with Charles IV. There seemed no better ambassador than the queen on the issue, yet the king remained sceptical of her motivation. The constable of Dover was instructed to intercept all messages by taking 'any such messenger' to the king before the messenger could 'deliver or show any letter or to recount any news to any one whatsoever'. Robert should also send a trusted man to accompany and watch the messenger along the way, in case he could have any chance to contact other people. By imposing such a censorship on message conveying, Edward II intended to make sure that he was the first to be informed of any possible conspiracy.

Similar practice was carried out frequently during this time of civil strife. On 4 August 1326, Edward II commanded a search for spies on a massive scale. Any of the merchants, messengers, and other foreign people who were found carrying suspicious letters or things damaging to the king and his subject, were to be detained and sent to the king. The scope of searching was not confined to the Cinque Ports, but also included the banks of the Thames between Recolvre, Greyston, and Whitstable, and even 'throughout England'. It is not hard to imagine that a considerable number of messengers, especially those coming from overseas, suffering great pressure, were hampered because of security checks before they could move on with their work. On 28 September 1326, six days after

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72 CCR, 1323-27, p. 361.
74 CCR, 1323-27, p. 361.
Isabella and Roger Mortimer began to invade his own land, Edward II ordered the interception of messages from his queen. He wrote to the mayor of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and the officials of other places that they should seize 'the messengers and bearers together with the letters' and send them to him 'immediately without opening the letters'.

From a messenger's view, however, it was not easy to get every situation in control. Difficulty of access to specific recipients formed a frequent obstacle to the prompt delivery of messages, and was therefore a common annoyance for the messengers. Especially during embassies, the itinerant nature of medieval royal households was a major problem that foreign messengers had to face. Ambassadors were special messengers engaged in diplomatic affairs, who mainly played the role of agents of their lords. They did not necessarily carry messages in person, for they themselves usually had messengers serving them; but here we can still have a look at some relevant cases, as they provide a vivid demonstration for the difficulty for messengers and envoys to approach medieval monarchs. In September 1498, Raimondo de Soncino, a Milanese ambassador in England, reported to his lord Ludovic Sforza, Duke of Milan, that he had 'not found the King [of England], who is gone to his devotions, and never stays in any place.' Advised by the Duke's Genoese subjects, Raimondo sent a messenger to the court, before he could draw any plan for the meeting, to learn 'where the king was, and when he should go to him'. The ambassador was apparently not groping around by himself before he took the advice; he had at least one private messenger -- or

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76 Beale, p. 77. The juxtaposition of 'messengers' and 'bearers' indicates that 'messengers' here were specified as bearers of oral messages, while 'bearers' meant the carriers of letters.
perhaps just a servant conveniently called by the same name -- assisting him. Raimondo's case was not too hopeless, for in a week's time he wrote to the Duke again, reporting his receipt of letter from the English Crown. He was asked to stay in London, as the king would return after Michaelmas. However, Francesco Foscari, a Venetian ambassador sent to Maximilian I's court in 1496, had to chase after the monarch restlessly for three months: 'non ho mai saputo che sia riposo' (I never knew what rest could be).  

As frequent travellers messengers were also vulnerable to wrongdoings. Some extremely unfortunate ones might even lose their own lives. An example took place in around 1301, 'the 28th year of the king [Edward I]', when a messenger of the Earl of Lincoln was killed. Geliane Scot of Bolingbroke, the victim's wife, presented a petition to the king and council, accusing the abbot of Barlings and his grangers of murder. It is not known why Geliane did not, or perhaps failed to, first sue at the common law court or turn to the Earl of Lincoln. It is not known, either, if the messenger's death was a result of political conflict, a personal grudge, or an unexpected homicide. According to the petition the earl's letters were found under the messenger's corpse, which infers that the murder happened on his way to make delivery, and the murder did not aim at the letter. Apparently the process of delivery discontinued because of the death of the bearer. Another case of messengers falling victim to violence was recorded in the *Plea Rolls for Staffordshire*. In 1228 Arthur, messenger of the Earl Marshal, was killed 'by Welsh malefactors in Rughehaye, in Brimlandes'. Fulk FitzWarin's messenger was luckier.

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78 Jean-Marie Moeglin, 'La place des messeagers et des ambassadeurs dans la diplomatie princière à la fin du Moyen Âge', *Études de lettres*, 3 (2010), 11-36 (p. 12).  
79 SC 8/324/E627.
He was 'bound hand and foot on the same occasion'. Given the unstable political situation in Wales at the time, it is hard to tell from the brief record whether such an attack was simply a result of brigandage or probably a intentional killing since the murdered messenger was in the service of the Earl Marshal. Such fatal interruption on the way was not common, but for messages of great importance, methods would be taken to avoid accidents. One way was to send duplicate dispatches via different routes. For example in February 1318, Donald of Athol, a royal messenger, and Robert of Chester, a courier, were sent out on different ways but carrying identical letters.

The security of information

A trustworthy messenger was the key to a successful delivery, while a derelict or disloyal messenger would be destructive in terms of information security. Messengers or couriers appointed to serve the royal household took an oath to guarantee their fidelity. So did messengers and servants entering the papal household. The practice of sealing was also an effective way to confirm the integrity of letters.

In the reign of Edward I, William Drayton, acting as a messenger of the bishop of Emly, was involved in an accusation of infidelity, because the letters in a box, which were entrusted to him, were opened without consent. The bishop and the messenger told totally different stories regarding the opened letters. According to

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80 'Plea Rolls for Staffordshire: 1228', in Staffordshire Historical Collections, ed. by George Wrottesley (London, 1883), IV, pp. 68-75.
81 More messengers were assaulted due to their representative role of their lords, which will be discussed later in the second half of this chapter, not included in this essay.
82 Hill, King’s Messengers, p. 113.
83 Hill, King’s Messengers, p. 119. No set form of such an oath has been found in household records, according to Hill, probably because the content and format of the oath were taken for granted.
the bishop, William the messenger, who claimed to be a household member of Lord Otto de Grandison, was conspiring with Nicholas of Clare, treasurer of Ireland. William brought the box to Nicholas and let him read the letters. William then returned to the bishop, played innocent and begged for resealing, as if he were the one who had fallen victim to deception. Yet William contended that he neither had the intention nor did anything to break his oath. According to him the box was lost at Clonmel, 'ubi assise capiebantur coram justiciario' (where an assize has been taken in the presence of a judge), and eventually found by some boys, who opened it and broke the sealing wax on the letters. The truth of the case remains shrouded in mystery, and it was not the only witness to the grudge between the bishop and the treasurer -- the same roll preserved many other records of the complaints made by the same bishop of Emly against the same treasurer of Ireland. What can be sure is that broken wax would mark the leak of information and a violation of privacy, immediately incur a crisis of trust and probably mar the reputation of the messenger as either being deceitful or inept.

Another interesting story was related in the History Anglicana of Bartholomew Cotton, concerning the treason of a knight, Sir Thomas de Turberville. Turberville was captured and imprisoned by the French at the siege of Rheims, but in 1295 returned to England as a spy serving the French. He pretended to have escaped from French prison and he was well received by the English king. As he later attempted to make his report in a letter to France, his messenger betrayed him and carried the letter instead to Edward I and 'gave him a full and open account of the treachery of his employer'. Ironically, in Turberville's 'treasonable letter' he asked the provost of Paris to 'confide fearlessly in the bearer.
of this letter'. Turberville was eventually sent to the gallows after his trial on 6 October.85 This narrative provides a historical scene where a private messenger, though not even named, made an active and decisive contribution to the disclosure of treason. How should we assess a bearer that actively leaks information? From the view of his employer, this was definitely a betrayal; yet for the English Crown, the messenger was apparently a praiseworthy servant who had served justice, or perhaps a cunning one who successfully avoided being incriminated and meanwhile expected a reward from the Crown. Or perhaps, the unnamed messenger himself was a successful spy sent by the king or any of his loyal subjects.

However, Peter Langtoft’s chronicle offers another possibility. According to the summary made in the *Chronicles of the Mayors and Sheriffs of London 1188-1274*, it seems that the messenger was one of Turberville’s servants, and had nothing to do with the disclosure. Rather, it was a clerk, who had written the letter for Turberville, that betrayed him 'to a member of the King’s Council'.86 This version of the story reminds us of more junctures when the security of information could be in peril: a leak did not have to wait to occur until letters were sealed up. During the writing process of a document, or in an even earlier stage, for instance, the discussion of a certain move, divulgence could take place, perhaps as a result of eavesdropping.

Ardis Butterfield mentions a common practice to achieve secrecy in medieval diplomatic communication in Chaucer’s time, which implies more confidence in messengers than in letters. Confidential matters were 'normally entrusted to a

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messenger to be conveyed orally’. The entrusted messenger would be issued a letter of recommendation, or of credence, which usually provides a summary of the message, or authorises the messenger to present the details of the oral message.\footnote{Ardis Butterfield, \textit{The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language, and Nation in the Hundred Years War} (Oxford: University Press, 2009), p. 190.} This kind of strategy, which was already a rather common practice from the third to first century B. C. among continental envoys, requires great trust in the personnel that carry the messages.\footnote{Pierre Chaplais, \textit{English Diplomatic Practice in the Middle Ages} (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 12.} Therefore, it was always judicious to achieve good control of the fidelity of messengers. After all, a sound messenger service was vital to the whole communication network.
Chapter II

*Service and Patronage*

Reliable messengers were crucial to the entire communication network in medieval England. A responsible messenger was expected to guarantee a good service, regardless of whether the messenger was a professional one or not. A good service, first of all, should be a fulfilled one. Failure to fulfill one's duty would incur punishment.

On 3 February 1329, in the presence of the mayor, aldermen, and the chamberlain, Robert le Bret, goldsmith of London, agreed to pay a fine of one tun of wine, because of his 'offence' as a failed messenger. It was reported that he 'had privily returned from the fellowship of his companions, who had been sent as messengers from the City to the King at Wyndesore [Windsor]'\(^1\). He also pledged to the Commonalty ten tuns of wine, which probably constituted an effective promise of good behaviour thereafter. There is no mention of the provenance or quality of the wine, which probably suggests some common acceptance of the price and quality of everyday wine in the fourteenth-century London market. Although the two determinant factors, that is, the price of wine per gallon and the exact amount of gallons for one tun in London in 1329, cannot be pinned down for certain, the value of Robert le Bret's fine can still be estimated, most likely, at around £4. In London in 1329 the average retail price of wine was probably around 4d per gallon, since that of Gascon wine, controlled by the London assize,

remained at this level in 1330 and 1331.\(^2\) The capacity of the tun varied throughout history, as one tun generally contained 252 gallons, yet occasionally it was also found equivalent to 208, 240, or 250 gallons.\(^3\) A rough evaluation of Robert’s wine is thus made at £4 per tun. The pledge of ten tuns of wine would therefore be worth around £40, according to the same logic. Despite all variables, the evaluation should still be valid, because what mattered in this case was not the amount of money that Robert had actually paid or would have to pay to obtain the wine, but the expectation of price that these casks of wine would be worth according to a familiar market rule at the time.

Although Robert’s mistake incurred him a fine, it is hard to interpret his performance as a result of simple dereliction of duty. It seems unlikely that the City of London would send a random goldsmith to act as one of its messengers to the Crown: Robert le Bret enjoyed leadership in his own guild or mistery, as well as in the administration of London. Around 1327 he was elected and then sworn into the mistery of goldsmiths in London.\(^4\) From 1331 to 1333 he was the Alderman of his guild.\(^5\) Due to his uninterrupted high social status in the Common Council, this once-failed messenger is unlikely to have been an irresponsible candidate. Robert probably held a reasonable excuse to defend himself from heavier punishment or disgrace. Nevertheless, no particular reason was given in the memorial to explain why Robert withdrew halfway without completing his task. Nor was there more

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\(^4\) *CLB*: E, p. 233 (Fo. cxc).

explanation on the nature of this wine penalty.

Stories of failed messengers are found in chronicles, but not in Public Records. The *Chronicon de Lanercost*, for example, tells the story of a treacherous Welsh courier called Lewyn, who lost his money for travel in a tavern and decided to hand Edward I’s letter over to the Scots. It is said that the traitor was rejected by the constable, and was hanged on a special gallows. However, when it comes to the king’s regular messengers, their reputation seems unflawed. From the reign of Henry III to Henry VI, no registered messenger of the kings has left any official record of failure in his duty or of treason. Historians have only noted one single case in the Memoranda Rolls of the Lord Treasurer’s Remembrancer, involving a messenger of Edward II named Robert le Messager of Newenton (Newington), that might be taken as an example of attempted punishment at first sight. Hilda Johnstone labels the case among Edward II’s ‘eccentricities’. On one day in July 1314, ’shortly after Edward’s defeat by the Scots at Bannockburn on 24 June’, the messenger, apparently off from his usual work, had a private conversation regarding the king with his neighbour Saer Kaym, sub-bailiff of Newington. The conversation was somehow overheard and reported to the king’s council, which caused Robert’s trial at the Exchequer in October 1315. The unlucky messenger faced an accusation that he ‘protulit irreverenter plura verba indecencia de domino rege’ (irreverently said many words improper about the king), since he

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7 Hill, *King’s Messengers*, p. 120.
criticised Edward II for not willingly hearing mass, and further scorned the king's 'vacare et intendere circa fossata facienda [...] et eciam ad alia indecencia' (idling and focusing on ditch-making and other indecent things). Robert was eventually bailed by Walter Reynolds, archbishop of Canterbury, at the insistence of Queen Isabella. The motivation of the queen was not known. It is not unreasonable to interpret the intercession as the queen's exercise of her patronage, although at the time the hundred of Milton, to which the manor of Newington belonged, did not pass to Isabella from her mother Margaret until 1318. The queen's help probably implies a favourable personal relationship between herself and her husband's messenger, or perhaps she personally agreed with Robert's criticism, and was interested in this outspoken messenger who had served the king's household well.

The king's household was aware of the vital role played by messengers in the efficiency of administration and security of communication. The offices of messenger were granted with discretion -- only trustworthy personnel would be appointed, subject to their previous good performance. The examination of credible candidates, as Hill assumes, was probably in the charge of 'the keeper of the wardrobe or his subordinate', when the messenger system was in the Wardrobe's control, and in the mid-thirteenth century the examination was handed over to the Chamberlain. Royal messengers, like their peers in the household, were supposed to take a customary oath of fealty when entering the office. The form of this oath probably varied little, mainly stipulating for the person's loyalty to the king, appropriate performance in business entrusted to him,

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9 E 368/86/32. A Latin transcription is provided as an appendix to Johnstone's article.
10 Johnstone, p. 266, fn. 3.
11 Hill, King's Messengers, p. 117.
and obedience to certain superior officers.\textsuperscript{12} Most of the king’s messengers dedicated the rest of their life to the post, yet the expression of a lifelong appointment in their letters patent did not appear as formulated until the time of Richard II. In May 1382, for instance, John Maynard was granted an office ‘for life’, succeeding to the post of Alan de Berle, a former king’s messenger who just passed away.\textsuperscript{13} Similar expressions remained and were frequently applied in the fifteenth-century letters patent for appointments of this kind.

\textit{Rewards for good service}

The relationship between lords and men was reciprocal. Good service deserved generous rewards, and appropriate rewards encouraged further dedication. This symbiotic relationship existed not only in the relationship between the king and his noble lieges, but also in that between the king and his menial retinue.\textsuperscript{14} A decent wage was the most regular and conspicuous way to reward messengers for their impeccable service, as recorded in various exchequer and wardrobe accounts, though always paid in arrears in a lump sum.\textsuperscript{15} The daily rate of wages for king’s messengers, as has been discussed in the first chapter, increased from \(\frac{1}{2}d\) in the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{12} An oath of an Exchequer messenger is said to be recorded in E 36/266 (the Black Book of the Exchequer), together with that of an Exchequer teller, dated during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. See the entry description on the National Archives website <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C7184934>. Hill suggests that the practice of taking an oath of office was so common that no set form of oath in the Middle Ages was preserved. See Hill, \textit{King’s Messengers}, p. 119. For the specific form of oath taken by Exchequer messengers in later centuries, see \textit{Reports from the select committee, appointed to inquire into the state of the public records of the kingdom, &c.}, report by Charles Abbot, Esq. (1800), pp. 232, 234. Also, for an Irish version of the oath of Exchequer messengers, which appears almost the same, see Gorges Edmond Howard, ‘Appendix’, in \textit{A Treatise of the Exchequer and Revenue of Ireland}, 2 vols (Dublin: J. A. Husband, 1776), II, p. 64.
\bibitem{13} CPR, 1381-85, p. 124.
\end{thebibliography}
late thirteenth century to 3d at the beginning of the fourteenth century, and later to 4½d towards the end of Edward III's reign, and was largely stabilized at the same rate up to the time of Henry VI. Livery, usually worth 1 mark for clothes and 4s 8d for shoes, would be assigned to the messengers 'yearly against Christmas'.

Wages and livery were not the only source of income for messengers. Messengers could expect gifts for New Year, as most household servants did. New Year gifts were usually in the form of clothing or accessories worth around 5s, and sometimes probably money, but it might vary according to specific situations. Hill mentions a rare example in the lesser royal household of Edward the Black Prince. John Dagonet, a favourite messenger of the prince, received 'a grey sumpter horse' in 1349, a very practical gift for a messenger, and later in 1355 an extravagant and exceptional gift of 'silver-gilt box enamelled with the ribbon' from his master.

Gifts would also be granted on other important occasions or at anytime of the year out of particular favour. Clothes and money were still two of the most common forms, but successful messengers could sometimes expect much more valuable ones -- houses, lands (or manors), forfeited properties, and sinecure offices that came with extra wages. Some of the grants were for life, while others were temporary, depending on the nature of certain positions or properties being given, as kings were usually able to make good use of their minors' properties or rights when they were provisionally in the kings' hands. Kings probably had their preference on the form of grants. Edward III granted many sinecure offices, as had his grandfather, Edward I. William de Ofton, for example, was made porter of the

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17 Hill, King's Messengers, p. 50.
castle of Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1336 and further given the custody of the prison there one year later.\(^{18}\) Similar offices also included keeping or guarding the king's parks, forests, castles, and lands of his lesser tenants-in-chief, as 'parkers, foresters, warreners, keepers of manors or bailiwicks, constables, porters and receivers'.\(^{19}\)

The practice of giving lands (whether escheated or not) or houses was frequent in the times of Henry III, Edward III, and Richard II. Edward I and Edward II are believed to have made very few grants of this kind to their household servants.\(^{20}\) Edward II was apparently not keen on giving sinecure offices to his messengers either, as Hill observes only two cases where such offices were granted. Robert of Hoton was granted gaol keeper of Stafford in 1315; and Robert Rideware was made bailiff of Dartford for his past service soon after Edward II came to the throne.\(^{21}\) Yet this does not lead to the convenient conclusion that Edward I and Edward II were mean to messengers. Challenging Michael Prestwich's impression of a less generous Edward I, Andrew M. Spencer reminds us to think about the availability of lands: peace would bring security of tenure, which naturally diminished the amount of disposable lands to grant. Further, it was Edward I's own policy that he intended to restore the alienated parts of the royal demesne and establish more royal estates, rather than give them away quickly.\(^{22}\) That is to say, what specific reward a messenger could (or could not) expect from the king was hardly a demonstration of the messenger's own value, but more a result of

\(^{18}\) *CPR*, 1334-48, pp. 263, 544.

\(^{19}\) Hill, *King's Messengers*, p. 68; for more examples, see pp. 69-71. Although Hill means to discuss the grants of offices and properties as a certain form of pension, there was no distinctive indication in the primary materials to define the nature of all those grants. Also see *Collection of Ordinances*, p. 19.


\(^{21}\) Hill, *King's Messengers*, p. 70.

\(^{22}\) Andrew M. Spencer, 'Royal Patronage and the Earls in the Reign of Edward I', *History*, 1 (2008), 20-46 (pp. 31-2).
contemporary political and economical complications.

Richard II’s administration, however, seemed to have a particular preference for transferring confiscated properties to his household members, in the form of direct money, goods and chattels, or lands and tenements. This is probably a sign of the unsettled polity. A few typical examples can attest this preference. John But, one of the king’s messengers, received in 1378 ‘the lands and tenements in Barton-upon-Humber of the yearly value of 4 marks’, previously in the hands of William Bryan, who was then outlawed for felony. In 1386 Thomas Gower, yeoman-messenger of Queen Anne’s chamber, shared with Hanekin Grys, his yeoman fellow, the goods and chattels, valued at £20, forfeited from Reginald Drowery of Salisbury because of ‘his outlawry’. In 1397 William Berner, messenger of the counting house, was given £10 to share with John Wodecok, groom of the counting house. This sum was a fine paid by John Wykes, marshal of the Bench and warden of the prisoners at the Marshalsea, due to his dereliction of duty -- two prisoners had escaped from his custody. Sinecure posts were still assigned, but much less frequently. Edward Fauconyr (or Fauconer), messenger of the chamber, for instance, was given in February 1396 the office of ‘waterbaylye’ of Dover, and in May the same year he was further granted £10 a year at the Exchequer. Both two grants were cancelled in 1400 because Henry IV gave him £20 a year instead. No substitution for, or cancellation of, the 10 marks granted in January 1399 ‘out of the issues of the county of Northampton’ was mentioned.

23 CPR, 1377-81, pp. 280-1. Interestingly, this grant came two months earlier than that of a daily wage of 4½d. See CPR, 1377-81, p. 296.
24 CPR, 1381-85, p. 559.
25 CPR, 1396-99, p. 224. For a similar case of granting forfeited money, also see CPR, 1396-99, p. 277.
26 CPR, 1391-96, pp. 684, 715.
27 CPR, 1396-99, p. 466.
An outstanding messenger might find his fortune growing by receiving grants of different types. Walter Becles, another messenger of Queen Anne, received in 1391 an escheat of a *messuage* in Farnham, worth 6s 8d per annum.28 When the queen passed away, he was granted an annuity of 5 marks 'from the issues of the manor of Haveryng' for his past good service.29 Then he came into the king's messenger system, and was appointed bailiff of West Smithfield in London.30

When it came to the fifteenth century, however, rewards to king's messengers became rare. Even the number of messengers was dramatically reduced to four, occasionally reaching five in the time of Henry VI, and the title of the office was formulated as 'one of the four [or five] messengers of the Exchequer'.31 No record of messengers being gifted or pensioned was entered into the Calendar of Patent Rolls during the reigns of Henry IV and Henry V. It is either that Henry IV and Henry V did not bother to care for their messengers' benefits, or that they had few resources at hand to grant to minor attendants, or even that the messengership itself had by then became a sinecure office equivalent to a settled daily wage of 4½d. A possible clue that this sinecure feature might have emerged may be seen in the grants to certain messengers from late in Edward III's reign to the beginning of Henry IV's reign. In October 1376 John Nouseley, William Hardyng, John Cook, and John Elyot were each granted a daily wage of 4½d 'as long as he be in the office of a messenger not labouring at the king's wages among the king's messengers', as a compensation rate given when they were waiting in the court.32 Two months later, John Elyot's letter patent was replaced by a similar one, yet without the exact

28 *CPR*, 1389-92, p. 408.
31 For example, see *CPR*, 1408-13, p. 213; *CPR*, 1413-16, p. 342; and *CPR*, 1441-46, p. 76.
32 *CPR*, 1374-77, p. 351.
expression in the former one. The other three messengers had their former grants inspected and confirmed in March 1378, and thus remained in the office throughout Richard II’s reign. John Elyot continued working in Richard II’s service until his own death in 1396, but it seems that he no longer belonged to the same group from December 1376. Later, John Nouseley and William Hardyng, together with Thomas Monk and Nicholas Auncell -- two more of Richard II’s messengers -- were kept in Henry IV’s service after the new king’s accession. From then on, those messengers were all entitled 'messengers of the Exchequer', and the number of personnel remained at four or five. Although the sinecure inclination in the nature of the position became more perceptible in the fifteenth century, the personnel still carried out some practical work. For example, Nicholas Auncell and John Sewale worked in a pair towards the end of July 1412 to make proclamation of 'certain treaties made between the king and those of Flanders'. Relevant calendar entries in Henry VI’s reign suggest that the practice of giving gifts to messengers was resumed to some extent. The numbers of grantees were very limited, yet the form of gifts was fairly diversified -- a barge, a house, and an office in charge of keeping the king’s 'Princespaleys' at Westminster with a daily wage of 3d.

While the mention of long and good service was a rather customary and formulaic practice, special merits would sometimes be specified. John Pyacle (or Piacle), messenger of Edward I, received in 1301 the custody of the pesage of Southampton, for his 'long service, and especially for the news he brought to the

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33 For John Nouseley, see CPR, 1377-81, p. 187; and CPR, 1413-16, p. 103. For William Hardyng, see CPR, 1377-81, p. 187; and CPR, 1399-1401, p. 235; for Thomas Monk, see CPR, 1391-96, p. 211; and CPR, 1399-1401, p. 103; for Nicholas Auncell, see CPR, 1396-99, p. 4; and CPR, 1408-13, p. 432.
34 CPR, 1408-13, pp. 432-3.
35 CPR, 1436-41, p. 403; CPR, 1429-36, pp. 194, 225.
king of the birth of Edmund, the king’s son’. Such a grant was also beyond an exchange in economics: it expressed not only appreciation of John Pyacle’s service, but more importantly the king’s affection towards his youngest son. Probably it was also a proud display of his own fertility, since this son was delivered in his sixties; the demonstration of his physical strength would then act as a reminder of his powerful kingship to the subjects on the scene. Pyacle was probably quite aware of the value of good news, as in 1299 he was reported ill on his way back carrying ‘good news’ with him. He was granted one mark as a gift from the king at Canterbury and was sent home for recovery. No further information was provided concerning the news in this case, but if the frequent association between his name and the idea of coming with good news has successfully attracted our attention, it was very likely that in the same way he managed to leave a good impression on the king.

A private messenger of an aristocrat might also receive generous gifts from the monarch, as a result of his good service in connection with the king (or kings). John Hatfeld (or Hatefield), messenger of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, was granted a house in Sandwich near ‘David Gate’ in 1432 for his ‘good service to the last and present king’, that is Henry V and Henry VI. This grant was later surrendered because he was given an even better reward in 1438 -- the office of verger of the castle of Sandwich ‘with accustomed wages, fees and profits and a dwelling’ near David Gate. William Sterky, messenger of Henry Percy, first earl of Northumberland, was granted 6d a day at the Exchequer in February 1400,

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36 CPR, 1301-07, p. 7. The Middle English term pesage, or peisage, was adopted from Old French. It was a duty paid for the weighing of goods. See peisage, pesage. OED, 2nd edn, p. 443.
37 Hill, King’s Messengers, pp. 58-9.
38 CPR, 1429-36, p. 194.
39 CPR, 1436-41, p. 159.
without any reason or further information being provided. Curiously, the same record is repeated twice elsewhere in the same calendar roll. The lack of organization in documenting might be suggesting a certain degree of chaos in Henry IV's household administration at the time.\textsuperscript{40} Even an enemy's messenger could be promised a gift, as long as he defected from his old master and then provided good service to his new lord. Adam del Spense, formerly a messenger of Robert II, king of Scotland, was granted 5 marks a year in 1387 'during good behaviour', as he had 'submitted and become the king's liege'.\textsuperscript{41} Although multiple allegiances were accepted in the late Middle Ages, it seems unlikely that Adam served the kings of England and of Scotland at the same time in 1387. If this small amount of money, equal in value to a wage slightly above 2\textit{d} a day, was his only source of income offered by the kings, it suggests more a sign of amnesty and acceptance of this person, rather than an encouragement of his defection or a recognition of his value.

Yet for some marginal figures in the household, rewards seemed not easily earned. John Trolle, a groom courier of the chamber, had been in the service of Edward III and Richard II 'without reward' for around 30 years, probably because his service was too trivial to be impressive. He was granted six ells of cloth yearly in 1387, as 'other couriers have long been wont to receive' for making their livery.\textsuperscript{42} This miserable treatment sounds even unusual among the couriers themselves. Fifteen years later, the new king showed his kindness and generosity, perhaps deliberately, by granting John Trolle, finally called 'messager', a daily wage

\textsuperscript{40} CPR, 1399-1401, pp. 193, 208, 393.
\textsuperscript{41} CPR, 1385-9, p. 284.
\textsuperscript{42} CPR, 1385-89, p. 270. Yet an earlier entry of May 1378 tells that John Troll ("currour") was granted 5 marks yearly, which confuses me about the term of 'without rewards'. Perhaps it was merely a kind of formulated way of appealing. See CPR, 1377-81, p. 237.
of 4½d, which was a standard wage for mounted messengers at the time and might have functioned as a pension, in consideration of John’s 'good service to Edward III for 40 years without reward and of his great age'.\textsuperscript{43} Notably, John's service was only referred to by the years in the former grant, rather than as 'good service' in the latter, and was only given that to which his peers had long been accustomed. In the latter grant from Henry IV, John's service to Edward III was specified, but his contribution to Richard II's household was simply brushed off in the mention of '40 years'. The subtle wording in these entries of letters patent suggests that rewards depended not only on the quality and importance of the service provided by the men, but also on the utility of grant for the lord. A reward was not a pure acknowledgement for one's past good service, but could also be used deliberately to demonstrate a lord's kind heart out of political purpose.

If we come back to the idea of rewards for good news, but extend the scope to the messengers who had no connection with royal business, such an exchange seems a natural and commonly accepted logic in the fourteenth century, providing messengers with an effective way to enlarge their wealth, or perhaps at least a means of alleviating their poverty. A private messenger, or even a random messenger, could also benefit himself in this way, as long as the recipient of the news could afford to offer a gift. A few cases entered in the Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem, where an escheator took proof of the age of a certain heir, present to us some valuable scenes where private messengers received rewards for bringing exciting news of birth. In these cases, messengers were never specified as professional messengers -- a related servant, or an arbitrary person who longed for a chance of serving, might as well carry out the mission. A typical scene is

\textsuperscript{43} CPR, 1401-05, p. 107.
observed in the case of Sir Robert Ogle, whose birth on 8 December 1353 at Callerton was attested in January 1375 to confirm his coming of age as heir of his father. According to several witnesses, when the heir's father received the news of the said Robert's birth in Newcastle, 'he gave the messenger a horse for his trouble'.\textsuperscript{44} It suggests that the delivery of this news might have cost the messenger his own beast or, perhaps, the messenger was in desperate need of a new one. No matter what the reason might be, the Ogle family was apparently rich and generous enough to offer him a horse as a gift. When the same news was delivered to Robert Bertram, the heir's grandfather, at Bothale, probably by a different messenger, the messenger was rewarded with 'a husband-land in Stainton for life'.\textsuperscript{45} Likewise, when John Moigne of Owermoigne was born in May 1354, his father Henry gave the messenger, who was very likely impoverished, 'an acre of land for life for his trouble', as a reward and in appreciation for bringing the news.\textsuperscript{46} Because of the nature of the Inquisition materials, the cases presented here are all related to heirs, that is to say, first-born male children. It is not known if the birth news of heiresses and other children who were not expected to inherit the family, was similarly valued and deemed worthy of such decent gifts. Nevertheless, at least when Edward I was informed of the birth of his youngest son Edmund at a fairly old age, as mentioned above, the merit of John Pyacle his messenger was certainly recognised.

\textit{Retirement benefits}

As a powerful and beneficent lord, the king not only provided his messengers with

\textsuperscript{44} CIPM, 1374-77, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 63.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p. 181.
decent material rewards when they were active in his service, but also cared for their life in feebleness, especially after retirement. Sometimes the grant of sinecure offices would serve the purpose. The grant of the custody of Southampton pesage to John Pyacle, the good-news carrier mentioned above, was very likely to belong to this type, since in the calendar entry his 'long service' was specified. More commonly, a pension could be collected directly at the Exchequer or the Wardrobe. It might also be issued by sheriffs of diverse counties or boroughs, including the overseas territories, from the king's established alms, if old servants returned to their own counties away from the court. However, the grant of alms did not go exclusively to the retiring staff. It was sometimes simply rendered as a monetary reward. Direct daily pensions were issued in arrears at the end of Henry III's reign. This type might be the most straightforward among other forms of financial aids, but soon after Henry III's death it fell into abeyance for nearly a century's time, and so did the practice of granting established alms in various counties. Both methods were not restored until towards the end of Edward III's reign. The value of a messenger's pension or alms in the thirteenth century seems rather 'insufficient to support the king's old servant in comfort', ranging from 1d to 2d a day in general. In the mid-fourteenth century, the amount for retiring mounted messengers increased to 4½d a day, and that for the retiring couriers was lower, at the level of 2d or 3d per day. The form of direct pensions altered from the accumulation of daily allowances to the grant of annuities in the later fourteenth century, as John Pygot's receipt of his £10 annuity in 1364 shows, perhaps for the convenience of

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47 For detailed examples, see Hill, King's Messengers, pp. 62-4.
48 Hill, King's Messengers, p. 82.
49 CPR, 1354-58, p. 245; CPR, 1358-61, p. 479; CPR, 1350-54, p. 488; CPR, 1350-54, p. 356.
accounting. A non-royal messenger also had a chance to share the benefit of a pension upon reasonable petitions, though he was not under the king’s direct patronage. In 1347 Edward III replied to one of the many articles petitioned by the ‘jurats and commonalty of the town of la Reole’ that John Vilet, their messenger serving in connection with the king, should be granted an annual pension of £20 from the profits of the bastide of Miramont.

By means of corrodies religious houses under royal patronage could also provide care and maintenance for old servants according to the king’s arrangements. A corrody in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was a lifelong allowance for maintenance, usually in the form of food, clothing, lodging, and other daily necessities, provided by a religious house such as a monastery, an abbey, or a hospital. Specific terms were negotiated and therefore varied. Yet the provision of this kind was very limited at each house, so servants had to wait for a vacancy -- a corrody was usually granted when a former recipient passed away. Similar to established alms, the grant of corrodies was not always charitable as a guarantee of necessities and shelter after retirement, but sometimes given out as a ‘money payment to a non-resident and not necessarily an aged man’, as rewards for an active servant’s past service and simultaneously the spur for his continuing dedication. This means of provision evinces a ‘mutuality of reciprocal needs and obligations’ that engaged more than two parties. The financial burden of

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50 CPR, 1361-64, p. 504.
51 SC 8/243/12134.
53 Hill, King’s Messengers, pp. 74-5.
providing for corrodians was also conspicuous, judging by the limited numbers of royal nominees at each place, and by the growing reluctance of such provision from the late thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{55}

The functioning of patronage entailed not only the direct interaction between the king and a subject, but also the efficient allocation of the king's assets. Resources were limited even for a king, and rewards were not to be assigned, suspended, or rejected, simply because of the king's inclination. The grant of rewards was involved in a multilateral game of giving and gaining, and took place according to priority when the king held sufficient counters at his disposal, be it money, goods, lands, positions, or pensions. It is also interesting to see that sometimes gifts, pensions, or other types of tangible grants were not necessarily given as rewards. They could be used to pacify an impatient messenger whose wage was much in arrears.\textsuperscript{56}

\textit{Advancement in status: the case of William Brancepath}

A successful messenger could expect more than material profits. There were also many other intangible benefits. When discussing upward mobility among couriers and messengers, Hill does not go beyond the category of ‘mounted messenger[s] with full privileges’.\textsuperscript{57} Yet from the view of the entire household, it was not the end of a servant's career ladder. A successful messenger would not remain in the same office and end up merely as a retiring messenger. The case of William Brancepath serves a telling example of such advancement. William worked in Richard II's

\textsuperscript{55} Hill, \textit{King's Messengers}, pp. 77-9. For a typical example revealing the financial burden on a hospital in the fourteenth century, see \textit{CPR}, 1334-48, p. 92.

\textsuperscript{56} Hill, \textit{King's Messengers}, pp. 48-9.

\textsuperscript{57} Hill, \textit{King's Messengers}, p. 121.
messenger system first as a courier of the chamber until 1387 when a vacancy of messengership emerged. From that time, William began his career as a fully privileged messenger, and in 1393 he became a yeoman of the chamber. Three years later, by 1396, he was referred to as king’s esquire of the chamber. It seems that with a title of esquire he still occasionally served as a trusted messenger, carrying messages to the continent. By 1392 while he was still working as a nuncius, he had married a knight’s daughter named Margaret.\textsuperscript{58} There is no evidence to show any possible royal contribution to this marriage.

With the elevation of his status the messenger (or rather, former messenger) would no doubt find himself enjoying better welfare. Growing material benefits came along with and also demonstrated the advancement of his status. At first when William was promoted to king’s messenger, he received a customary wage of $4\frac{1}{2}d$ a day. Yet since 1390 the practice of granting a daily wage was given up in this case, perhaps in part for the convenience of accounting. Instead, William obtained a more generous annuity of £10 from the issues of Lincoln, which marks a leap in his wages.\textsuperscript{59} In 1391 he was further given the custody of the manor of Kennington as a sinecure post, with an extra daily wage of $4d$, though this appointment was later transferred to an esquire in January 1396.\textsuperscript{60} In 1392 William and his wife Margaret received in survivorship £10 yearly from the issues and profits of Northampton, after the death of a knight named Richard la Souche, who might be a former joint recipient of the king’s established alms from the same county. In 1393 when he was made yeoman of the chamber, William was given for

\textsuperscript{59} CPR, 1389-92, p. 319.
\textsuperscript{60} CPR, 1391-96, p. 471; CPR, 1391-96, p. 700.
life an annuity of £10 at the Exchequer. In 1394 he was further entitled constable of the castle of Limerick in Ireland, though no extra income was mentioned, before the king left for Ireland in person in the same autumn. In November 1394 he was mentioned in a letter of protection granted for the next half year among with other knights, esquires, and clerks in the king’s company. Curiously, he was simply referred to as 'king’s servant' in the first letter patent of 1394, and his position was not made clear, either, in the letter of protection, while the identities of most other personnel were written in black and white. It seems that he was no longer working as a chamber yeoman, and was likely in probation for further promotion.

William probably completed his tasks in an impressive way during this sort of transition period, and by 1396 he took up the role of king’s esquire of the chamber. In July 1396 he took over the keeping of Rockingham, a castle in Northamptonshire belonging to the king, under an obligation to provide a yearly sum of £4 2s 1½d at the Exchequer in Michaelmas and Easter sessions. Probably during the process of handover, or due to the new keeper’s sharp eyes, William Burdon, the former keeper who had held Rockingham for ten years, was found concealing part of the issues and profits of the castle without producing a complete account, in effect stealing money from the king. The sum accumulated to £4 2s ¾d, and was thus escheated and transferred to William Brancepath as a reward.

His fortune kept being enlarged, as in October 1397 he was again granted a sum of forfeited goods and chattels worth £50, from Philip Seintcler, knight, in

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61 CPR, 1391-96, p. 258.
63 CPR, 1391-96, p. 493.
64 CFR, 1391-99, p. 183; CPR, 1396-99, p. 38.
Bedford and Buckingham.\textsuperscript{65} In 1399 he received another yearly grant of 20 marks, probably first given as alms by the bailiffs of Northampton but later produced from a fee farm of the town.\textsuperscript{66} By 1403, though the occupant of the throne had changed, William’s stable annual income included the £10 from the issues and profits of Lincoln, £10 from those of Northampton, and 20 marks from the profits of a fee farm in Northampton.\textsuperscript{67} In theory William also collected £10 every year at the Exchequer, since he held the grant ‘for life’ since 1393. According to an \textit{inspeximus} issued in 1422 when Henry VI succeeded the throne, earlier letters patent have confirmed in November 1399 and in June 1413 that this grant of £10 yearly at the Exchequer was still valid, though these confirmed entries are not found, and no record of payment has been entered in the aforementioned calendar roll of close letters in 1403, either.\textsuperscript{68} The custody of the Rokyngham castle, which was granted to him for twelve years since May 1396, remained in his hand until December 1415, more than seven years later than the supposed expiry date. Notably, in the related entry William was referred to as ‘the late farmer’, rather than a more decent title. This implies that his former status as king’s esquire was not hereditary, but earned by himself during his good service to Richard II.\textsuperscript{69}

William passed away between 1415 and 1422, evidenced by the 1422 \textit{inspeximus} granted to his widow Margaret. The only grant confirmed to be valid by that time was the £10 annuity out of Northampton, formerly given in 1392 for the lives of the couple in survivorship.\textsuperscript{70} To put it briefly, William Brancepath had

\textsuperscript{65} CPR, 1396-99, p. 248.
\textsuperscript{66} CPR, 1396-99, p. 466; CPR, 1396-99, p. 495.
\textsuperscript{67} CCR, 1402-05, pp. 62, 64.
\textsuperscript{68} CPR, 1422-29, p. 74. An \textit{inspeximus} is a letter patent or a charter beginning with the Latin word \textit{inspeximus}, confirming an earlier letter patent or charter to the grantee.
\textsuperscript{69} CFR, 1413-22, p. 128.
\textsuperscript{70} CPR, 1391-96, p. 157.
risen from a courier to a fully privileged messenger in 1387, and in nearly one
decade's time to an esquire of Richard II's chamber by 1396. His stable income in
theory soared from 4½d a day (i.e., less than £7 a year) in 1387 to at least £30 and
20 marks (i.e., slightly over £43) a year by 1403.

Other intangible benefits: privilege and protection

Since king's messengers were selected from a group of trustworthy candidates and
thence worked in the monarch's service, a sense of dignity and honour would
naturally come along. As servants of the king they were sometimes granted certain
privileges and protection so that their work could be carried out smoothly and
without delay. The most conspicuous type of privilege was related to horse relays,
as already mentioned in the previous chapter. A writ of aid could be issued to allow
a messenger to 'arrest', 'take', or 'hire' horses during his task, 'within liberties and
without, except in the fee of the church', mostly at the king's cost. A commission
could be assigned to sheriffs and bailiffs to help a messenger to take horses during
his long journey in a certain period, or on his way back to the king 'with all
speed'. Private messengers of noblemen occasionally enjoyed the same privilege
of horse-taking, but the cost was usually not covered. William Tryst, messenger of
Henry Beaufort, cardinal of England, was given in 1429 a commission to take
necessary horses to 'ride to the presence of the said cardinal' at the messenger's
own expense. It is not known if the cardinal later compensated William for this
amount of payment, but it seems highly likely that the cardinal would have done
so.

72 CPR, 1405-08, p. 63; CPR, 1416-22, p. 103; CPR, 1401-05, p. 285.
73 CPR, 1422-29, p. 550.
Messengers serving the king were sometimes given a letter of protection to guarantee their safety and to secure the possessions carried with them, especially when they had to go overseas. Bartholomew de Houeton, for instance, was granted protection when Henry III sent him as a messenger to buy goshawks in Denmark and Saxony.\textsuperscript{74} Judicial protection was also granted during certain work, so that messengers would not be prevented from performing their duty by legal issues. This kind of protection was put into effect through a clause beginning with \textit{volumus} ('we wish that').\textsuperscript{75} On 23 September 1287, for example, John de Heddishour, sent overseas as Edward I's messenger, received a letter of protection with the \textit{volumus} clause covering his journey until 'a fortnight after St Hilary', that is, approximately until 27 January 1288.\textsuperscript{76} The \textit{volumus} clause mentioned here was a clause inserted in John's letter of protection by which \textit{sit quietus de omnibus placitis et querelis} ('he should be free from all pleas and plaints') until his mission was completed four months later.\textsuperscript{77} Non-royal messengers were also seen under the king's protection on specific occasions.

In the case of Douenald de Atheles, Edward III's messenger sent to Ireland in August 1328, it is recorded that Douenald was given protection and safe-conduct with 'clause \textit{nolumus}'.\textsuperscript{78} However, the mention of \textit{nolumus} seems very likely to be a transcribal error -- a misreading of letters in the manuscript. In terms of fourteenth-century chancery hands, the letters of \textit{u}, \textit{v}, and \textit{n} look similar in appearance, especially when they were written in a hasty and cursive manner. It is

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\textsuperscript{74} \textit{CPR}, 1232-47, p. 240.  
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{CPR}, 1281-92, p. 277.  
\textsuperscript{77} Peter Crooks, ed., 'Glossary', in \textit{A Calendar of Irish Chancery Letters, c. 1244–1509} <https://chancery.tcd.ie/content/glossary> [accessed 4 May 2016].  
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{CPR}, 1327-30, p. 309.
highly possible for a transcriber to have mistaken an u/v for an n, when he or she could only recognise the abbreviated name of the clause without seeing its complete form. Also, the nolumus clause possessed a different nature from the volumus clause. Though the expression of this type of clause underwent alteration, protection with the nolumus clause was usually granted in the fourteenth century to protect religious houses or houses under royal custody, rather than individuals, from 'a burden of hospitality'. Later it meant to prevent unwanted guests, 'including sheriffs and bailiffs', from seeking lodging at the related houses.\textsuperscript{79} It makes no sense that Douenald the messenger should enjoy a protection with the nolumus clause, and the assumption of an error in transcription could therefore provide a reasonable explanation.

Another type of protection, usually with a rogamus clause inserted, was especially given to the alms-collecting messengers sent by divers religious or secular establishments. For example, letters of protection with the rogamus clause were directed to all bailiffs, and 'all archbishops, bishops, and ministers of holy mother church' in 1281, in order to protect the keepers of London Bridge and their messengers who travelled throughout the country to collect alms 'for the repair of the bridge which has fallen into a ruinous state'.\textsuperscript{80} Most commonly in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries until the middle of Edward III’s reign, this type of protection was granted to certain hospitals (such as leper houses) lacking sufficient resources to live upon, or meeting financial problems, sometimes to foreign ones as well, so that their messengers could be under protection when


\textsuperscript{80} \textit{CPR}, 1272-81, p. 422.
collecting alms or dealing with specific businesses.\textsuperscript{81} However, impersonators existed throughout the period. Measures were therefore taken against fake messengers, so as to protect the interests of the genuine ones. It was ordered that those who 'falsely represented themselves to be the messengers and collectors' of certain hospitals or other establishments, should be arrested and detained.\textsuperscript{82}

Privilege of aid and protection were sometimes given in a combined manner. A typical example is presented when Queen Eleanor appointed Stephen de Fuleburn and John de Bosco as her proctors and messengers in September 1270 to collect a tenth of ecclesiastical benefices in Ireland and to audit the reckonings of various collectors' receipts. Edward I ordered bailiffs and other personnel in Ireland to protect the two \textit{ad hoc} messengers. Writs of aid were also sent to James de Alditheleye (or Audley), Justiciar of Ireland, and all lieges of the king throughout Ireland, 'in favour of the said Stephen and John and their substitutes'.\textsuperscript{83}

Grantees of protection letters did not always play the passive role of recipients. Occasionally, some of them would actively take advantage of it to avoid, or at least postpone, legal responsibility. At the 1390 Parliament, the commons made a complaint about the abuse of royal protection, as certain grantees had 'used their protection and remained in peace in their lands'. It was requested that protection should only be valid in certain marches or parts, and within limited periods. Yet due to the nature of messengers' work, such geographical and temporal limitation was not supposed to be applied to messengers in an equally strict way -- 'those who act as messengers of the king and kingdom outside the kingdom shall have

\textsuperscript{81} For a few out of many examples, see \textit{CPR}, 1327-30, p. 344; \textit{CPR}, 1334-38, p. 324; and \textit{CPR}, 1354-58, p. 541.
\textsuperscript{82} \textit{CPR}, 1313-17, p. 87; \textit{CPR}, 1327-30, p. 317.
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{CPR}, 1266-72, pp. 458-9.
protection during the time when they are carrying the said messages out of the kingdom'. According to Richard II's reply, protection with clause *quia prefecturus* (granted to personnel about to go abroad), and that with clause *quia moratur* (granted to personnel who were already performing service overseas), should be effective only within a granted period. If a suit was brought before the starting date of a protection, no protection should come into effect, and the person should make his answer through his attorney or in person, unless the planned expedition was a journey with the king, or was related to king's messages for the business of the kingdom. If the person remained outside the kingdom after the given period, not because of his duty, or he withdrew from the service, the protection should be revoked.  

Not all types of protection share the same nature, but these certain types discussed in the Parliament were similar to the type with the *volumus* clause mentioned above. Grant of such protection did not come as a reward or encouragement for good service, but as a result of the mutual or symbiotic interests between the king and his men, since the purpose of granting protection held a close connection to the king's business and sometimes even to the national interest. When a messenger performed his service, his own condition became affiliated with a higher interest. His safety and physical freedom from legal issues mattered in the process of the king's business, and thus underwent royal protection. When the messenger was no longer on duty, or the mission was not related to the king, the servant's personal interest became detached, and royal protection would not follow. Simultaneously it suggests that in this way, by interfering and postponing lawsuits until their business was completed, the

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84 *PROME*, the parliament of January 1390 (item 25).
medieval English kings placed their interests, together with the national interest, above the legal rights of all others.

*Hazards of messengership*

Being a messenger in the Middle Ages meant frequent trips at a time when travelling itself was a risky activity. Besides accidents caused by geographical and meteorological factors, malefactors on the road could be one of the major threats. A bas-de-page scene on one page of the Smithfield Decretals depicts the meeting of a hare and a fox.\(^8^5\) The hare can be identified as a messenger, equipped with a spear and a messenger bag, holding a letter in its hand. This hare-metaphor stresses the element of speed in message delivery. It further suggests the typical danger of meeting villains en route with the hare’s confrontation with a fox, its natural predator, dressed or disguised as an innocuous pilgrim. Two examples of this danger have been mentioned above in the first chapter: a messenger of Earl Marshall and a messenger of the earl of Lincoln fell victim to murder on their way, in 1228 and around 1300 respectively.\(^8^6\)

In some cases, however, trouble came with no accident: it was exactly the other side of the patronage-coin that messengers had to embrace. When a messenger was in his lord’s service, he acted not only as a bearer of messages, but also as his lord’s agent with a representative nature, with the bond of symbiotic interests connecting them. What came along with this bond did not always show the bright side; patronage was in itself double-edged: while enjoying all the

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\(^8^5\) London, British Library, MS Royal 10 E IV, f. 53v.  
<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMINASP?Size=mid&llID=32670>  
[access 14 May 2016]

\(^8^6\) Wrottesley, ed., pp. 68-75; SC 8/324/E627.
benefits, such as privilege and protection, the messenger was also taking risks for potential malice.

If a lord failed to earn appropriate respect and obedience, his messenger might fall victim to the recipient’s fury or antagonism. In 1290 a clerk named John le Waleys was sent by the archbishop of Canterbury, John Peckham, as his messenger to the household of Bogo de Clare to deliver ‘certain letters for making a citation’. The archbishop’s messenger, however, experienced obnoxious treatment. According to his complaint, he was forced to ‘eat those letters, and even the seals attached to them’; he was imprisoned, beaten, and maltreated.87 In 1318 Robert de Newenton, messenger of Edward II, also fell victim to violent disregard. When he delivered certain writs of privy seal, the unfriendly recipients ‘threw the writs on the ground and trampled on them, and assaulted him’. The king required oyer and terminer to be carried out on the messenger’s complaint.88

To make the situation worse, if the lord was incapacitated, messengers might be exposed in fatal danger. John Drayton, an unfortunate messenger of Henry VI, was caught up in power struggle during the civil war. In August 1460, one month after the Battle of Northumberland, the messenger was ‘slayne & murthered by [th]e servants’ of Henry Percy, earl of Northumberland, when he delivered to the earl’s household a letter patent concerning the castles of Wressle and Pontefract.89 In the name of the captive king the letter required Northumberland to transfer the holding of the two castles to Richard Neville, earl of Salisbury.90 The Percies and the Nevilles were in violent feud before the outburst of the Wars of Roses. Wressle

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87 PROME, ‘Original Documents: Edward I Parliaments, Roll 1’; SC 9 /1; KB 27/124/68.
88 CPR, 1317-21, p. 176. Names of the recipients were recorded as Henry de Sancto Laurencio, Robert de Dodemayton, Thomas de Bulyhurst, Thomas Boton, William Benet, Thomas Kempe, and German Hure, but their identities and the content of the writs were not known.
89 C 49/32/8.
90 CPR, 1452-61, p. 610.
castle was traditionally a possession of the Percy house, but forfeited into the royal control in 1403 after the execution of Thomas Percy, earl of Worcester. In 1440 the manor of Wressle was granted to Ralph de Cromwell. Due to the marriage between Thomas Neville and Maud Stanhope, niece and co-heiress of Cromwell, the Nevilles became entitled by 1453 to the inheritance of the Wressle castle. It is not hard to imagine the anxiety and outrage of the Percies when they found their ex-property fallen into the hands of their archenemies. It seems that the Percies had refused to hand it over to Cromwell, or they had seized it back, given that Wressle castle was still at that time occupied by the Percies, according to the letter that John Drayton delivered. Pontefract castle, on the other hand, was a Lancastrian stronghold near Wakefield, confronting the Yorkist Sandal castle nine miles away. Evidently, there was no chance for Northumberland to surrender these estates to Salisbury, and the Yorkists must have known it well. The intention of this letter patent was to make a provocative gesture of triumph, claiming with panache that the royal authority was now under the influence of the Yorkists. A proclamation immediately ensued, demanding that Henry Percy and his retinue should appear before the king in person 'to answer for the said disobedience and contempt', with no accusation of homicide. Neither side showed interest in seeking justice for the dead messenger. Henry Percy then denied any instruction or knowledge beforehand towards the murder. Nevertheless, the unfortunate messenger was collateral damage of the civil war, when the lordship of his master

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was too weak to provide effective protection for his life or redress for his murder.

A number of cases to be discussed below provide a prosopographical image of messengers entangled in the political struggles in the early fifteenth century (1400-1406). These cases show how the experience and fates of messengers were influenced by the changing power and authority of their masters. In February 1400, the first year when Henry IV's government was established, a messenger of Henry Percy, first earl of Northumberland, named William Sterky, received a daily grant of 6d from the new king that the Percy family had supported.\textsuperscript{93} This William had probably provided a good connection between Northumberland and Henry Bolingbroke, but it seems unlikely that this reward would have lasted for long, since the relationship between the king and the Percies soon fell apart and changed dramatically into hostilities. When the Percies began to collude with Henry IV's Welsh enemy to stage their rebellion, the circumstances of the Percies' messengers were about to suffer a turning point.

Three years later, on the battlefield of Shrewsbury battlefield, William Lloyd (or Lloit), an esquire from Denbeigh in North Wales, fought with Hotspur against Henry IV and was killed during the battle. It is said that William was once a messenger between Hotspur and Owain Glyn Dŵr. William's lands and all rights 'within the lordship of Dynbigh [Denbeigh]' were thence forfeited, and were transferred to a Richard Moton of Baghere in May 1404.\textsuperscript{94} Another messenger named John Morys, who had served Thomas Percy, earl of Worcester and uncle of Hotspur, was said to be 'an adherent of Glyn Dŵr' after Thomas Percy's execution. The king therefore forfeited all the goods belonging to John. Among the forfeited

\textsuperscript{93} CPR, 1399-1401, pp. 193, 208, 393.
items a horse valued at 2 marks and certain goods worth 5 marks were then granted to a Roger Assent in October 1403 to compensate his loss of horses and harness at the same battle.\textsuperscript{95} These messengers’ endings were closely bound to their lords’, as their messengership in itself, as well as the actual service they had carried out, stood for their political affiliation during these struggles.

In May 1406 Henry IV sent his esquire Robert Waterton as his messenger to Henry Percy, earl of Northumberland, only to cause Robert to be detained by Northumberland for one month until John Waterton, Robert’s brother, came to replace the hostage.\textsuperscript{96} Before Robert’s imprisonment, Northumberland attempted but failed to neutralize Ralph Neville, earl of Westmorland, since Westmorland escaped to Durham when Northumberland and his retinues surrounded the castle of Witton-le-Wear.\textsuperscript{97} Yet the sense of frustration and a messenger’s representative role might not be the only reasons for Northumberland to seize Robert as hostage. Though never knighted, Robert, as well as his uncles Huge and John Waterton, ’rose to national prominence after the Lancastrian usurpation’.\textsuperscript{98} Henry IV relied greatly on his service during the Percy rebellion, and it is possible that Northumberland had recognised Robert’s ’deeds’ on related occasions -- during the warfare in 1403 Robert had helped to suppress the earl’s army, forcing him to retreat to Newcastle, and thus preventing him from joining forces with his son Hotspur. Robert was also commissioned to arrest Hotspur’s widow and son after

\textsuperscript{95}\textit{CPR}, 1401-05, p. 301. Only the forfeiture of goods was mentioned in the letter patent, which suggests that this messenger possessed no land or estate.

\textsuperscript{96} \textit{PROME}, 'Henry IV: March 1406, Part 2' (item 6).


\textsuperscript{98} Helen Castor, 'Waterton, Sir Hugh (d. 1409)', \textit{ODNB}, online edn, Jan 2008

\url{<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/50140>} [accessed 17 May 2016]
the battle. It is not impossible that Northumberland took the chance to seek revenge on the Watertons; he might have knowledge of Robert's involvement in the previous rebellion. Therefore, Robert's detention or hostage was likely to be a result of multiple factors: the earl's own anxious situation; Robert's prominence among the king's retinue, which added value to future negotiation; his participation in the confrontation against the Percies; and most notably, the direct association with the king's will that epitomized by Robert's messengership in this case.

Chapter III

Messengers in Middle English Literary Works

In the works of late medieval writers, multifarious creatures, objects, and abstract ideas could metamorphose into the role of messengers. For example, 'The bisy larke, messager of day,/ Salueth in hir song the morwe gray ...' The appearance of the lark proclaims the arrival of daylight, or the rise of 'firy Phebus'.\(^1\) Another messenger of day, according to Chaucer's knowledge, is Lucifer, the morning star.\(^2\)

A notional messenger of this type works more like a harbinger, whose forerunning offers a sign to predict what should ensue. It works in the same way when a stork is seen to be 'messager of springynge tyme', and April is called messenger to May.\(^3\)

Likewise, sickness and old age are deemed as messengers and couriers of death.\(^4\)

The messenger metaphor is also applied to body parts, highlighting the connection between the external and the internal -- the conveyance of information from outside to the inner world, and vice versa: 'The eye is a good messenger,/Which can to the herte in such maner,/Tidyngis sende that [he] hath sen,/To voide hym of his peynes clen'.\(^5\)

Eyes function as messengers for a lover's uneasy heart, for they acquire and send news into his consciousness, thus soothing his gloomy void of knowledge and certainty, and releasing him from great torture. On the other hand the mouth is an outbound 'messanger of þe soule', as words come out of

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\(^1\) The Knight's Tale, 1491-3; RC, p. 45. All quotations of Chaucer are made from Larry D. Benson, ed., The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988; repr. 2008).

\(^2\) Troilus and Criseyde, 3.1417; RC, p. 532.


\(^5\) The Romaunt of the Rose, 2919-22; RC, p. 717.
one's mouth to reveal one's inner thoughts.\textsuperscript{6} The vein is the messenger of physical health, because by taking a pulse a physician can tell whether or not one's heart is strong.\textsuperscript{7}

As a rhetorical trope messenger metaphors bring about an effect of poetical decoration, which vivifies the language, but has least impact on the main plot and the theme. Yet the depiction of various messenger scenes effectively provides medieval poets with a versatile narrative device. Traces of human messengers at work are naturally and frequently discernible in many Middle English literary works. It was not beyond the experience of the contemporary audience when they observed a fictional messenger taking orders, hastening on the road, passing on messages among different characters, or seeking a prophesied figure. The verisimilitude of such scenes must have brought familiarity to medieval eyes, since individual messengers provided a customary and inevitable channel to rely on for distant communication at the time, except that messengers in real life were usually not obliged to dash through the lands with a romantic sense of urgency for sublime enterprises.

\textit{The messenger concealed}

A most fundamental role that a messenger scene plays in the process of narration is as an interlude that facilitates a transition between scenes. In Chaucer's tale of Ceyx and Alcyone in the \textit{Book of the Duchess}, after Juno receives Alcyone's prayer she dispatches her messenger to Morpheus. Morpheus then brings Ceyx's body to Alcyone in her dream, and makes the body tell her about Ceyx's fate. The narrative

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{6} Trevisa, \textit{On the Properties}, I, p. 200, ll. 27-9.}\n\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{7} Trevisa, \textit{On the Properties}, I, p. 280, ll. 25-7.}
point of view is naturally carried away by the messenger from Juno to Morpheus, the god of Sleep, who is about to present a dream vision for Alcyone. The physical appearance of the messenger seems self-evident for his exclusive identity. When the half-awake Morpheus enquires who the speaker is, the messenger's self-reference of the simple 'I' apparently provides sufficient information. If a medieval English reader were not familiar with the story in other languages, it would be natural to wonder what the reason could be. Perhaps the messenger works as Juno's special messenger, whose face and voice are already familiar to Morpheus. Perhaps the messenger bears an unmentioned token or emblem, or he might wear specific attire, which is notable enough to indicate the identity of the sender. No matter what the case might be, the messenger's succinct self-introduction before conveying the order has implied a certain familiarity in the process for both him and Morpheus. It is not perfunctory to assume that communication in this manner has happened between the divine figures many times before, especially if the audience recalls how naturally and smoothly the messenger has arrived at the location, despite the fact that the description of the location is obscure and imprecise: the place is only sketchily featured by the crude landscape of valleys, cliffs, and caves. Apparently there is no divine telepathy involved: even gods have to rely on messengers to deliver orders. Except for the mysterious force that enables the divine messenger to locate and reach his recipient so effortlessly, the imagination of mythological gods and goddesses communicating with each other was established in a way not so different from the practical experience that Chaucer gained from his service to the royal court,

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8 Book of the Duchess, 184-7; RC, p. 332.
though this imagination was certainly not his own innovation.

The tale of Ceyx and Alcyone was well-known among late medieval writers. Guillaume de Machaut’s *Dit de la fonteinne amoreuse* has been recognised as a main source for Chaucer’s narrative, in addition to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

John Gower, Chaucer’s contemporary, also relates the story in his *Confessio Amantis*. Yet Chaucer’s version is set within a larger scheme of narration; if we compare his version with the other three, Chaucer’s originality immediately stands out in his peculiar adaptation concerning the messenger scene. In the other works mentioned above, Juno’s messenger is clearly identified as Iris, or Yris, goddess of rainbow, who is renowned as a reliable messenger of gods in the Greek mythological context. This might explain why Chaucer takes for granted that Morpheus can immediately recognise the messenger. However, Chaucer never discloses the name of the messenger, and he even alters the messenger’s gender by using a male pronoun. As a result Juno’s messenger is reduced into a nameless character: the original identity of Iris is effaced. When Chaucer decided to present Juno’s messenger as a random servant, he must have realised that it was not proper to keep the female pronoun, since all the messengers working in the royal household were male.

In Ovid’s and Gower’s versions, Iris travels in a specific manner, in accordance with her personification of the rainbow: she puts on ‘velamina mille colorum’ (a robe of a thousand colours), then travels across the sky, and descends to the valley.
in a rainbow curve.\textsuperscript{12} Machaut, however, abandons this particular style of travel, and simply depicts her method as flying in the air (‘en l’air s’en est volée’).\textsuperscript{13} Similarly, Chaucer provides no more than a plain statement: the messenger ‘wente/ upon hys wey’ and ‘com fleynge faste’.\textsuperscript{14} Chaucer’s messenger even has the least chance to speak. When Juno orders him to send the message, he replies with an immediate departure, without any verbal reaction. The only few shouts he utters prior to his minimized self-introduction are those to wake Morpheus; and again, with no more words he leaves the cave after Juno’s message is conveyed. Iris in Ovid’s and Machaut’s works also leaves quickly when her mission is completed, yet with an amusing reason provided: she feels overwhelmed with drowsiness, and therefore no longer stays.\textsuperscript{15} With this detail both versions have stressed the power of sleep, as even a goddess cannot resist its influence. Chaucer, however, screens out the comic element from the scene: ‘And went hys wey whan he had sayd’.\textsuperscript{16}

The plain statement of the messenger’s unhesitating departure fits with the brevity of the narrative, and gives way to the staging of Alcyone’s dream, which brings in the key notion of dream vision and suggestively parallels the bereavement of the Black Knight. It also avoids introducing a discordant note of amusement that risks disrupting the consoling atmosphere.

Chaucer uses the messenger scene in a purely functional way: to change the scene. As part of his simplified narration, this effect is achieved on purpose. Besides concealing the messenger’s identity and reducing the process of message delivery, Chaucer’s touch of simplification extends to Morpheus. Morpheus in Ovid

\textsuperscript{12} Ovid, p. 162, ll. 589-90. \textit{Confessio Amantis}, 4.2982-4; Gower, p. 381.
\textsuperscript{13} Machaut, p. 70, l. 588.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Book of the Duchess}, 153-4, 178; \textit{RC}, p. 332.
\textsuperscript{15} Ovid, p. 164, ll. 629-32; Machaut, p. 72, ll. 619-23.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Book of the Duchess}, 191; \textit{RC}, p. 332.
and Machaut is a different character from the god of Sleep, to whom Iris initially rehearses Juno’s order. Chaucer assigns both functions to Morpheus, instead of presenting two related characters, one receiving the messenger whilst the other carries out the practical task. Chaucer abandons the chance to caricature and therefore to emphasize the power of sleep during the messenger’s exit. This effective refusal to digress complies with the simplification concerning the identity of Juno’s messenger, and his entry and exit. The sense of hastiness in narrative hovers in the entire first part of the book, as the whole tale of Ceyx and Alcyone is related very sketchily and is even left unfinished.

Ellen E. Martin reads the hastiness as a result of Chaucer's unsophistication in his early works. She points out the lack of a sophisticated incorporation dealing with 'the thematic parallels between Alcyone and the narrator or the Knight'. It is 'the temporal continuity' of the whole narrative that the young Chaucer was more concerned with, since his reference to Alcyone's story naturally leads on to the narrator's later prayer to the god of Sleep and then to his own dream vision, while leaving no remark on the relation between Alcyone and the other two characters.\(^\text{17}\)

Chaucer's treatment is probably flawed, but the wiping of the messenger's original identity is intentional indeed. J. J. Anderson recognises the 'reductive approach' from Chaucer's sketchy account of Alcyone's tale, and attributes it to the characterisation of a careless narrator who later shows an ostensible proclivity to misunderstanding.\(^\text{18}\)

In his later dream the narrator keeps failing to make a connection between the Black Knight’s sorrow and his love for Blanche, which


highlights the narrator's insensitivity. Anderson further confirms the narrator's lack of insight, as his view is 'limited to immediate practicalities', by pointing out the plain closing of the whole poem: with 'a line of typically matter-of-fact statement', the narrator concludes his dream vision as 'no more than curious episodes in his life'.\(^{19}\) The downgrade of Iris to a nonentity is part of this reductive approach: when the narrator's personality is shaped in this manner, it is not unnatural for the audience to have heard a cursory retelling of Alcyone's story, in which the image of Iris is misrepresented and corrupted to a nameless male messenger. In brief, the messenger scene is presented through a narrative persona, rather than in Chaucer's own voice; and therefore, Anderson's theory can well explain why the messenger scene has to be kept straightforward and purely functional, if the simplicity is not to be easily dismissed as a literary defect of a young poet.

The messenger to blame?

Chaucer's employment of messenger scenes is not confined to the fundamental role of scene changing. Unlike Juno's messenger in the Book of the Duchess, who appears almost negligible to the main plot, the messenger in the Man of Law's Tale is deeply engaged in a series of events. Without this messenger, who passes misinformation between the major characters, the story would not be able to progress. In the second part of the tale, when Lady Custance is delivered of her son, a letter is sent from the constable to King Alla, who is at the time away in Scotland. Before reaching the king, the messenger rides to the castle of Donegild, the king's

\(^{19}\) *Ibid.* (p. 234). The closing line that Anderson mentions is: 'This was my sweven; now hit ys doon'. *Book of the Duchess*, 1334; *RC*, p. 346.
wicked mother, and reports the news to her. Persuaded to take a rest there for the night, the messenger drinks heavily, and in his deep sleep the original letter is stolen and replaced with a false one, in which the queen is accused of giving birth to a demon. Despite the horrible news, the sorrowful king replies in a letter that his wife and child should be protected until he returns. Once again the messenger takes the letter, rides back, and rests at Donegild’s court before reaching the recipient. The situation repeats itself: the messenger is well received by the king's mother and gets drunk; again, the king's letter is stealthily replaced. According to the forged letter, Custance and her son should be sent aboard the ship by which she came, and banished from the country for good. As a result, the calumniated queen and her newborn child are cast adrift.20

The Man of Law's attitude towards this messenger is exposed explicitly in one of the many instances of apostrophe. The use of apostrophe has been acknowledged as Chaucer's addition to Nicholas Trevet’s account, which contributes to the narrator's unique voice. Fourteen lines of exclamation are inserted in the middle of the storytelling to accuse the two characters that are responsible for the misinformation.21 Walter Scheps identifies the sense of public speaking and the demand of an audience in the Man of Law's employment of his exclamation.22 As if he were charging the messenger in front of a jury, the Man of Law addresses the first half of the fourteen-line speech to the intoxicated messenger, before spending the other half rebuking the king's evil mother:

21 *MLT*, 771-84; *RC*, p. 98.
O messager, fulfild of dronkenesse,
Strong is thy breeth, thy lymes faltren ay,
And thou biwreyest alle secrenesse.
Thy mynde is lorn, thou janglest as a jay,
Thy face is turned in a newe array.
Ther dronkenesse regneth in any route,
Ther is no conseil hyd, withouten doute.  

That the messenger is accused of betraying secrets suggests the narrator's (and the poet's) knowledge of the code of behaviour for historical royal messengers. According to the conventional oath of fealty taken by the king's messengers of the Exchequer, the messengers were supposed to keep the secrets of the king and the court as part of their duty. Betraying such a secret would naturally be deemed as a dereliction of duty, if not as an action of treason. Though the news of the queen giving birth hardly sounds like a so-called secret, and the messenger is certainly not blamed for sharing this joyful news, a good messenger should at least deliver the true message to the right person. This messenger is therefore expected to stay vigilant and keep his sealed letters safe, if he is fully aware of his duty as well as any possible threat to the security of information. The messenger, however, has no alertness to conspiracy and gluttony; nor does he understand the importance of self-discipline.

The Man of Law's emphasis on the messenger's own moral weakness becomes more conspicuous if the narrative is compared with its sources. In addition to the

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23 *MLT*, 771-7; *RC*, p. 98.
24 *Reports from the select committee, appointed to inquire into the state of the public records of the kingdom, &c., report by Charles Abbot, Esq. (1800)*, p. 232.
long accepted idea that Trevet's 'Life of Constance' in his Les Chroniques has provided a direct source for Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale, Peter Nicholson has argued for Chaucer's debt to Gower's tale of Constance in Book II of the Confessio Amantis, and D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., has established the influence of the Middle English Emaré in the light of verbal parallels. Gower's messenger is not associated with the idea of excessive drinking; he is depicted as one of the victims framed by the king's wicked mother. Gower only refers to the effect of 'strong wyn' when the second letter is stolen, and further excuses the messenger's sound sleep with 'the travail of the day'. Gower thus provides an image of an exhausted yet innocent messenger overwhelmed by painful labour and strong alcohol deliberately prepared for him. Likewise, in the original tale of Trevet, the 'maliciouse beyuere' (evil drink) is mentioned only once. Chaucer inherited from Emaré the idea of getting drunk twice, and even weakens the fact that the messenger's drunkenness is part of the king's mother's device, which leads the

25 Robert M. Correale, 'The Man of Law's Prologue and Tale', in Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales, 2 vols, ed. by Robert M. Correale, and Mary Hamel (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2005), II, pp. 279-87. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., 'Emaré: an influence on the Man of Law's Tale', The Chaucer Review, 2 (1983), 182-6. Hanks has identified six close parallels and other minor ones between Emaré and the Man of Law's Tale to support his argument. For instance, Chaucer's first fake letter, which reports the birth of the king's son, contains the elements of 'the purported fiendishness of the newborn' and 'of avoidance' (as no one in the castle dares to approach it). The two elements appear in the same order as in Emaré, while Gower introduces neither of these ideas, and Trevet only mentions the newborn's demoniac form without using the word 'fende' or 'feendly'. See Hanks, Jr., p. 183; MLT 750-3; Emaré, 536-7, 540. Another example appears right after the king reads the false letter; the king in Gower and Trevet makes no association between the monstrous birth and Jesus, yet Chaucer's king calls the baby 'the sonde of Crist' (MLT, 760), as he writes in reply; this idea is very likely learnt from Emaré, where the king believes the baby was sent by 'Jhesu hym-self' (Emaré, 562). Other main parallels appear in the following scenes: in the references to the king's mother and her court (MLT, 730, 786; Emaré, 515, 576); concerning the amount of drink offered to the messenger (MLT, 743; Emaré, 528, 581); in the response of the constable or steward when he receives the command to banish the queen and her baby (MLT, 810, 817; Emaré, 604, 621); and his response when the returning king asks about them (MLT, 879; Emaré, 763). In these scenes Chaucer uses similar, if not identical, verbal expressions and images found only in Emaré, not in Trevet or Gower. For more detailed comparisons, see Hanks, Jr., pp. 183-5. For the text of Emaré, see Edith Rickert, ed., The Romance of Emaré, EETS e. s. 99 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906), pp. 17-20, 24.

26 Confessio Amantis, 2.1008-10; Gower, p. 157.

27 Hanks, Jr., p. 184.
audience to feel disturbed by the messenger's gluttony and unwariness.

In addition to moral defects Chaucer, in the voice of his narrator, also explores the messenger's motive to see the king's mother halfway on his mission: if the messenger did not take the initiative, Donegild's plot might have no chance to work at all, or at least not in this way. Hanks notices that only in Gower and Trevet is the name of the king's mother's dwelling specified as Knaresburgh. In Knaresburgh was between London and Scotland, as explained in Gower, a middle place the messenger 'scholde passe thurgh'. In this setting the audience might readily agree that it is natural and proper for the messenger to report to the king's mother the birth of her grandson, since he has no knowledge of her plot, and is passing the town anyway. In Chaucer, however, the Man of Law mentions nothing about the exact location of the king's mother's castle. Chaucer's interest in the messenger's motive is probably inspired by 

\[\text{Emaré,}\] where the information of the castle is also effaced. Instead 

\[\text{Emaré}\] elaborates the generous gifts that the messenger receives: a robe and forty shillings, together with other expensive gifts, are awarded to him for bringing the news. This type of gift-giving is not depicted from fictional imagination, but echoes a medieval messenger's practical experience. As discussed in Chapter II, good news, especially that of a son's birth, was usually delivered with an expectation of good rewards. The example of Edward III's messenger John Pyacle, whose work was highly appreciated after bringing the news of the birth of Edmund, the king's youngest son, and the examples of some private messengers, who were reported in the \textit{Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem} to have received generous gifts, should convince us that it is highly possible for a

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28 Hanks, Jr., p. 184.
fictional messenger to be conscious of this lucrative task. The emphasis on gifts in *Emaré* is very likely to have inspired Chaucer’s interpretation of the messenger’s motive of riding to the king’s mother. Although the Man of Law does not reveal the form and value of any reward, except for suggesting a lavish provision of ale and wine, he plainly states that the messenger’s concern is one of self-interest: 'This messenger, to doon his avantage,/ Unto the kynges mooder rideth swithe'. The messenger then proclaims the news in a slightly flamboyant manner ('thanketh God an hundred thousand sithe!'), and actively exposes to the king’s mother the presence of the sealed letters, asking if he can provide her with service. With no mention of where the king’s mother lives, this may easily raise a suspicion that the messenger has ridden to Donegild on purpose, seeking extra profits, even if he might be obliged to take a detour.

However, the messenger in *Emaré*, although lavishly rewarded, is not depicted as a profit hunter, since he does not offer to expose the news of the queen until the king’s mother asks about her. Gower’s messenger also understands the benefit of announcing the birth of a king’s son, as he 'thonk deserve wolde' to report it to the king’s mother, and he receives many gifts indeed. Nevertheless, Gower’s messenger has a justifiable reason for seeing her: as mentioned above, Gower keeps the specified name of the castle, and sets it on the route that the messenger must take. It would seem discourteous if he were to merely ride away without greeting the king’s mother in person. In this situation a conversation concerning the queen and her newborn son would spontaneously and inevitably take place. Thus the messenger in the Man of Law’s narration is the only figure presented as

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31 *MLT*, 729-30; *RC*, p. 97.
32 *MLT*, 732-9; *RC*, p. 97.
33 *Confessio Amantis*, 2.949-53; Gower, p. 156.
actively seeking his own benefits, and therefore offers the evil mother a good chance to start her conspiracy.

As a result of his moral flaws and self-interest, the messenger in the *Man of Law's Tale* falls into the villain's snare, and fails to perform his duty successfully: the letter is intercepted and counterfeited, more than once. By stressing the intrinsic problem of this indiscreet messenger the narrator therefore denies his innocence, and blames him as an unconscious accomplice to Donegild's plot. In the voice of the Man of Law Chaucer raises a point whereby the insecurity of information is largely imputed to the neglectful messenger. The reliability of messengers was indeed a major concern for administrators who aimed to secure a stable channel for authentic communication in an age when long-distance communication had to rely on human labour. As mentioned in the previous chapters, before a messenger could officially enter the king's service, it was likely that either the Wardrobe or the king's Chamber would make a careful examination to ensure the trustworthiness of the person. The messenger then took the oath of his office, in which his duty and loyalty was stipulated. Most messengers remained in office for the rest of their lives, if not promoted to a higher position; from the time of Richard II the messengership was granted for life as stated in the relevant letters patent, which suggests great trust from the royal administration.

It is not surprising that amongst historical royal messengers in Chaucer's time it is hard to find an unreliable figure like the messenger in the *Man of Law's Tale*. The figure of this neglectful messenger bears little relation to reality and contributes largely to the dramatic movement of the plot. Although much attention has been drawn to the messenger's personal fault through the narrator's
employment of apostrophe, a sensible audience might soon realise that the problem is far beyond the messenger's dereliction of duty. A fundamental problem is revealed about the core figure of the polity. At the beginning of the second part of the tale, when Custance is barely known to Alla, Chaucer portrays the king, though pagan, as 'a just lord and judge' regarding the trial of the false knight.\textsuperscript{34} However, when an issue involves the king's nearest relatives, namely his wife and his mother, the king's former possession of wisdom and judgment crumbles. In the first place, the king and his entrusted constable fail to anticipate the lurking malice towards the queen and the king's newborn heir, which naturally poses a threat to national stability, and therefore no precaution is taken to secure the correspondence. While the administrators show little concern for this issue, it seems unfair to simply impute the misinformation to the messenger. The king further appears to be credulous and self-absorbed: he is easily convinced by the content of the falsified letter, probably because of its sealed appearance, and so engrossed in his own sorrow that he even forgets to summon the messenger to verify the news, or to make a detailed inquiry. Since the messenger actually has full knowledge of the authentic message, and certainly knows how to congratulate the king, as he has demonstrated his eloquence at Donegild's castle, a quick meeting would expose the lie. The king's failure to take appropriate action after receiving the news shows a lack of judgment. Although he did take measures to protect his queen before leaving for Scotland and also after being informed of the false news, his instructions fail to achieve effectual results, because he has no insight into the source of the real danger.

Chaucer had been involved in the English kings' secret service (‘in secretis negociis domini regis’) several times relating to Anglo-French diplomatic business in 1370s and 1380s, and thus possessed a good knowledge of the practices of secrecy, which aimed to hide information from possible interceptors.\(^{35}\) Chaucer certainly understood that the misinformation in the case of Custance was clearly not the result of a technical problem in message transmission. Instead it is an indication of a miscarried kingship. The king’s impotence is exposed in his ignorance of the lurking threat to his queen and his heir, and of a potential treachery from his next of kin, and also in his unsophisticated practice in administrative communication. An observant member of the audience might perceive this underlying criticism, the point of which is aimed at the king, rather than the scapegoated messenger. The narrative thus possesses two competing voices: Chaucer allows the narrator to voice his own judgment and to shout out some complaints in an apostrophic manner, while at the same time a hidden voice is arranged to expose the narrator’s shortsightedness. The Man of Law’s censure is directed towards the villain, who objects to the foreign queen from the beginning of her marriage with the king, and towards the messenger, whose moral weakness is utilised by the evil mother so that he becomes an unconscious accomplice. The villain is a conspicuous target to whom every upright member of the audience would naturally direct their fury; and the messenger is such a minor figure that any menial servant in his place might easily repeat his fault. That is to say, the Man of Law’s exclamation is merely hurled at noticeable and superficial aspects of the problem, while no candid admonition is addressed to the more fundamental issue.

of kingship. The narrator therefore mirrors the king in the way that they both fail to locate the root of the problem; better judgment might well have been expected in respect of their professions as a lawyer and a king.

Yet it is not my intention here to continue to discuss the narrator's unsatisfactory character or his controversial suitability as a Man of Law. In brief, Chaucer provides two competing views concerning the security of information: one on surface, and the other underlying the narrative; the first blames the messenger for his dereliction of duty, whilst the second implies that the ultimate responsibility should lie with top administrators. Chaucer exposes his own name in the Prologue to the Tale, when the Host invites the Man of Law to tell a story, and the narrator mentions a fictionalised Chaucer as author of the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Legend of Good Women*.\(^{36}\) This self-exposure might have intended to distance himself from the narratorship, and therefore to shield himself behind his storyteller, but just as Gania Barlow has pointed out, the audience is at the same time fully reminded of his authorship, and is thus prepared 'in advance to pay attention to the complex tactics and manipulations of narrators'; this includes his arrangement of the underlying voice that warns the administrators of their responsibility for the intactness of the communication network.\(^{37}\) In addition, Chaucer's experience of serving the royal administrative system also gave him a deeper understanding of the practical complexity of an information leak. Critics have noted Chaucer's addition of the messenger's torture in Part Three, when the letters are found false and the interrogation takes place. This delineation is not found elsewhere:

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\(^{36}\) *MLT*, 46-76; *RC*, pp. 87-8.

\(^{37}\) Gania Barlow, 'A Thrifty Tale: Narrative Authority and the Competing Values of the *Man of Law's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, 4 (2010), 397-420 (pp. 419-20).
This messager tormentted was til he
Moste biknowe and tellen, plat and pleyn,
Fro nyght to nyght, in what place he had leyn;
And thus, by wit and sotil enquerynge,
Ymagined was by whom this harm gan sprynge.38

Most attention has been paid to the first three lines, where the element of coercion stands out prominently. James Landman, for example, suggests the promise of truth and certainty brought out by the brutal method.39 Critics have omitted, however, an interesting point made in the next two lines: the answer is not readily revealed in the messenger's confession. Close enquiries and careful analyses are required, before the truth can be deduced from the intricate mass of information provided by the questioned messenger. Gower and Emaré show little concern with the practical difficulty of tracing the source and cause of the false messages. When brought to the king and questioned, Gower's messenger immediately confesses the two nights at Knaresburgh, since he stays nowhere else.40 The messenger in Emaré, likewise, when asked about his route, refers to the king's mother in a straightforward manner, as if he knew clearly that there were no other events worth mentioning on his way; the king, without any doubt or further investigation, is convinced at once, and even starts to think about burning

38 *MLT*, 885-9; *RC*, pp. 99-100.
40 *Confessio Amantis*, 2.1256-65; Gower, p. 164.
the untried suspect.\textsuperscript{41} His instant conviction of his mother's guilt suggests an existing knowledge of her evil nature and hostility to the queen, which appears contradictory to the king's lack of precaution and sensible judgment concerning his mother's treachery. It is likely that Chaucer realised the incongruity of the king's behaviour in \textit{Emaré}, and thanks to his practical experience he understood that the source of the leak was not usually found in such an effortless way as Gower and the author of \textit{Emaré} might have expected.

\textit{The extraordinary messenger}

Fictional messengers provide an essential channel to facilitate, or sometimes a chance to manipulate, distant interaction between main characters. Yet in most works the contribution of messengers seldom goes beyond the boundaries of narrative strategy. A prominent feature confirming this limit is that messengers are usually nameless. They usually appear to be supporting characters, even negligible to the entire frame, and therefore do not necessarily need to be named. Chaucer probably sees no point in contriving a name for the only messenger in the \textit{Man of Law's Tale} riding between King Alla and his constable, who has no name, either; and in the \textit{Book of the Duchess} he even deprives Iris the divine messenger of her name as part of her real identity, in order to reduce the famous messenger to an anonymous one.

The Middle English romance entitled \textit{Athelston} by its editors, however, presents an exception: a lowly messenger is not only a named character, but also a namesake of the king in the story. The only extant text of \textit{Athelston}, containing 812 lines, is found in Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College, MS 175, an early fifteenth

\textsuperscript{41} Rickert, ed., \textit{Romance of Emaré}, p. 25, ll. 790-8.
century manuscript. The poem itself is dated to the last quarter of the fourteenth century. The main plot enjoys twists and turns, but is essentially uncomplicated. Four messengers, Athelston, Wymound, Egeland, and Alryke, meet by chance in a forest and become sworn brothers. Soon afterwards Athelston becomes king of England and elevates his brothers: he makes Wymound earl of Dover, Egeland earl of Stone, and Alryke archbishop of Canterbury. The king also marries his sister Edyff to Egeland, and shows particular favour towards Egeland’s family; out of jealousy Wymound secretly accuses Egeland and his wife of planning to poison the king. The furious king sends a messenger to trick Egeland and his family into coming to London. When they arrive at Westminster Egeland, his heavily pregnant countess, and his two sons are seized and imprisoned. The queen, also pregnant, tries to intercede, but the king kicks her in fury, and she miscarries. Athelston kills his own heir in this way. The queen then sends the messenger to Canterbury to call Alryke for help. The archbishop hastens to Westminster and pleads for a fair trial. Enraged again, the king strips Alryke of his archbishopric and banishes him, but in return Alryke excommunicates the king and the whole nation. The king soon gives way before a conflict could ever burst out between himself and the barons, who support the Church. The archbishop then arranges an ordeal of fire for the prisoners, and the innocent prisoners are vindicated as they pass through the fire without injury. After passing the test the countess gives birth to a son, who is St Edmund, and the king adopts the child as his heir. The king refuses to reveal the source of the false accusation at first, since he has given his word to Wymound; but under the threat of trial by fire, the king eventually reveals the traitor’s name. Then

the messenger is sent to entice Wymound to come to London with false news. Wymound denies his treachery, and is ordered to go through the trial by fire as well. Naturally he fails to pass the test. The villain confesses his wrongdoing out of jealousy, and is finally sentenced to death.43

Though it was once dismissed by some critics, such as Donald B. Sands, as an over-valued simple narrative, in the past few decades Athelston has drawn positive critical attention, which has focused on aspects such as masculinity, historicisation, kingship, legal perspectives, and feminist issues.44 A. Inskip Dickerson was probably the first to notice the unusual characterization of the lowly messenger, a foundling who shares the same name as the king. Scenes relating to this 'only low-ranking character' appear symmetrically near the beginning, before the middle, and near the end of the whole story, adding up to nearly 220 lines, covering more than a quarter of the entire poem. Dickerson discerns from these scenes a realistic subplot, mainly driven by the messenger, 'somewhat anomalous' to the framework of the romanticised main plot.45 The main plot appears non-cyclical indeed, yet the three-fold subplot repeats the scene of message delivery, which places the messenger at the centre of the stage as a proper hero in a romance. Jane Bliss also perceives the lowly messenger's central position in the poem, because of the doubling of the name. She further associates King Athelston's previous messengership with the messenger Athelston's current profession.

45 A. Inskip Dickerson, 'The Subplot of the Messenger in Athelston', Papers on Language and Literature, 2 (1976), 115-124 (pp. 115-6).
suggesting the messenger's role of alter ego to the king.\textsuperscript{46} In a short article Kenneth D. Eckert develops a similar idea in terms of the entanglement of messengership among the characters, and establishes the messenger as a 'healing' example for the failed king.\textsuperscript{47}

Athelston's subplot consists of three episodes of the messenger's epistolary journeys. Traditionally in medieval romances messenger scenes function as insignificant interludes, and therefore a concise account of the action would be sufficient to effect the transition. In Amis and Amiloun, a notable analogue to Athelston, for example, the work of messengers is simply mentioned in a few words, contributing no more than a visible link between senders and recipients at different places.\textsuperscript{48} A more ambitious poet might use messenger scenes in a more complicated way to enrich the narrative, especially perhaps to provide insights into main characters, or even into the narrator. Layamon in his Brut, for example, uses his noble messengers, three bishops and seven knights, who come to call Arthur back as the new king, to offer a stage to dramatise 'Arthur's initial response to the call', which exposes 'the complexity of his emotions and desires'.\textsuperscript{49} Chaucer provides another pertinent example: his messenger scenes in the tale of Custance, as discussed above, implicate the king's lack of precaution and judgment, and therefore contribute to an underlying criticism that competes with the narrator's view. However, the poet of Athelston shows an extraordinary narrative originality: the three episodes of message delivery cover more than a quarter of the entire

\textsuperscript{46} Jane Bliss, Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2008), p. 47.


\textsuperscript{48} Kenneth Eckert, ed. & trans., Middle English Romance in Translation, pp. 24, 28.

\textsuperscript{49} Joseph D. Parry, 'Narrators, Messengers, and Lawman's "Brut"', Arthuriana, 3 (1998), 46-61 (pp. 48-9).
poem, but have no direct interaction with the main plot, nor do they contribute to a better characterisation of the supposed main figures, Egeland, Alryke, and Wymound, the recipients to whom the three messages are delivered. Instead these episodes comprise impressive yet seemingly irrelevant details about the lowly messenger and his journey, which evinces the poet’s particular concern for this messenger, and his surprisingly sound knowledge of travel and messengership.

In the first episode the messenger is sent from Westminster to Stone by the gullible king to summon Egeland and his family with the excuse that the king wishes to knight the earl’s two sons.50 Regardless of the false nature of this letter, the first episode draws attention to the messenger’s swiftness in action and his professional dedication. When the sealed letter is handed to him the messenger 'wolde nouȝt lette’ (wishes not to delay), sets out immediately, and 'hys a ful good spede’ (goes with top speed). When he reaches his recipient he brings the letter to Egeland's hand in person, and supervises the earl's immediate reading. The messenger also retells the content of the letter, and advises the earl to depart as soon as possible, leaving him no chance to postpone reading the letter.51

The second episode is the most interesting, and here the messenger's seemingly contradictory nature stands out. After interceding in vain, the queen asks the messenger to deliver a letter to Canterbury to seek help from the archbishop. The queen offers in return an earldom in Spain out of her dowry, and also a hundred coins of red gold, which are meant to be equivalent to the value of a horse. The messenger declines the land, (and probably also the title of earl that would come with it,) but accepts the hundred coins, and promises to arrive in

50 Trounce, ed., Athelston, pp. 72-4, ll. 182-234.
51 Trounce, ed., Athelston, p. 73, ll. 197, 201-16. Eckert’s translation is also consulted; see Eckert, ed. & trans., Middle English Romance in Translation, pp. 87-8.
Canterbury by nightfall. The messenger further complains, near the time of sunrise, about his toil in the previous task, and therefore requests a meal with wine and ale as well as some sleep before he sets out mid-morning for the next journey. A detailed geographical description, covering eighteen lines and naming the renowned places and towns passed by, depicts the route taken by the messenger, who hastens from Westminster to Canterbury in half a day. After the archbishop reads the letter, he immediately orders his men to set up a relay of fresh horses, before leaving for London with the messenger. Running hurriedly without pause, the messenger’s horse eventually dies from exhaustion on London Bridge, and the messenger cries.\footnote{Trounce, ed., \textit{Athelston}, pp. 76-9, ll. 297-410. Eckert, ed. \& trans., \textit{Middle English Romance in Translation}, pp. 90-3.}

In the third and last episode the messenger hastens to Dover to deceive Wymound with the false news of Egeland’s execution. When Wymound offers to reward the messenger with 'besauntys good plente' (a good plenty of coins), the messenger requests a good horse, pretending that his old horse was lost because of this task, and Wymound fulfils his wish. The messenger then rides to Gravesend first, which probably indicates that the new horse is of great speed, he waits there for Wymound, and afterwards they ride together to Westminster, where the villain is to face his doom.\footnote{Trounce, ed., \textit{Athelston}, pp. 88-90, ll. 699-758. Eckert, ed. \& trans., \textit{Middle English Romance in Translation}, pp. 100-1.}

The second episode depicts the messenger's pre-travel rest, his journey to Canterbury, the archbishop's arrangement of a horse relay, and the messenger's loss of his own horse with realistic touches; this exposes the poet's comprehensive familiarity with the same type of practices in real life. The geographical information that the poet provided, especially the route from Westminster to
Canterbury, recreates for his contemporary audience, as well as for modern readers, a vivid map of the high road on which many pilgrims and other travellers made their journeys in the last quarter of the fourteenth century: the messenger sets out from Westminster, passes 'Charynge-cros', goes through 'Flete-strete', and leaves London over 'Loundone-brygge'; then he continues to make his way through 'Stone', 'Steppyngbourne', 'Osprynge', 'pe Blee', and finally towards the Canterbury Cathedral.\(^{54}\) The parish of Stone is about two miles from Dartford.\(^{55}\) 'Steppyngbourne' is likely to be Sittingbourne, the inns and houses of which received many travellers in the fourteenth century. 'Osprynge' was also on the historical route connecting London and Canterbury, and from the twelfth century became a resting point for pilgrims on the route to Canterbury. 'Pe Blee' refers to Blean Forest, which seems to have been a dangerous place where travellers were vulnerable to robbery.\(^{56}\) This is still a valid and ideal route to follow, even for a modern traveller who intends to travel between London and Canterbury. The distances between Westminster and Canterbury, and between Dover and Gravesend, also seem accurate.

The messenger's pre-travel request has drawn criticism because of his untimely concern for his self-interest. Dickerson appreciates the messenger's refusal of the more profitable part of the queen's offer, that is the earldom in Spain, and also his liberty to postpone the journey for a meal and rest, as a partial indication of his goodwill and generosity to perform voluntary service. Yet

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\(^{54}\) Trounce, ed., Athelston, p. 77, ll. 335-48.


Dickerson finds the messenger's need for food 'at this suspenseful moment' quite inopportune and even 'absurd'.  

57 This sense of absurdity is a result of critical indifference. The rationale for the messenger's behaviour needs to be established from the messenger's view. Dickerson's comment implies his lack of empathy for the messenger's dramatic toil and practical concerns. As the messenger himself states, he has ridden 'prytty myles off hard way ... sip it was day', and it is 'nerhande passyd prime', the time when he feels he should eat and drink to regain energy.  

58 Depriving an exhausted messenger of food and rest, and expecting him to ride on a journey even longer than the previous one right away, would seem rather unrealistic and inhumane. Even if the rider were resilient enough to take up a new task so soon, he would have to think of the horse, which seems to be his own property. In real history horses were equipment not officially provided for the king's messengers in medieval England. If a messenger lost his horse during the service it was 'his [own] misfortune, 'and no concern of anyone's'.  

59 Usually a messenger would use just one horse of his own for routine work within England, except on special occasions such as in times of war, when some messengers would be granted the privilege of taking fresh horses at some points; this practice of horse relay would allow the trips of messengers to remain at high speeds. In June 1372, for example, a series of letters close were sent to bailiffs of Canterbury and Rochester to ensure that Edward III’s messengers would be able to hire fresh hackneys at a reasonable price.  

60 Another example of Edmund Kent, messenger of Richard II's chamber, tells that in February 1399 the messenger was issued with a
letter patent starting with 'writ of aid', which allowed him to 'take as many horses ... from time to time necessary for the despatch of the king's affairs, at the king's charges'.\textsuperscript{61} Athelston the messenger receives no such privilege in this case: despite its urgency, his journey to Canterbury seems to be a secret mission, of which the king has no knowledge. That is to say, the messenger must understand that he will have to use his own horse all the way, at the risk of his own property. It would not be prudent to exhaust his horse at the moment, because the messenger's miserable horse might die before he could ever hope to reach Canterbury.

In addition, before the messenger raises his request for food and rest, he promises the queen that he will 'be þere tonyȝt'.\textsuperscript{62} At the moment of his reply, the messenger has already estimated the time of his arrival. He calculates not only the time he will spend on the journey, but also the preliminary time he needs for refreshment, and the fragmented time he might need to rest the horse occasionally on the way. This calculation results from his extensive working experience and confidence in his professional skills. His refusal to make an immediate departure also shows his full awareness that the balance between efforts and rest is crucial: the messenger knows well that devotion should not be conducted with blindness. By setting up those details above the poet evinces his understanding of the messenger's physical pain and practical concerns, and portrays the messenger in a heroic light of prudence and aplomb, rather than in the alleged attitude of inappropriate self-importance.

Though the messenger has no access to fresh horses on the way, the

\textsuperscript{61} CPR, 1396-99, p. 510.
\textsuperscript{62} Trounce, ed., Athelston, p. 77, l. 320.
archbishop is wealthy enough to arrange a relay. When Alryke receives the queen’s request for help, he orders his men to set up a relay of horses on the supposed route to facilitate his swift journey to London: a 'fresch hors' at 'ylke fyue mylys' (every five miles), which adds up to nine horses in total. The return journey is taken mainly in darkness: the bishop and the messenger set out from 'euensong' and arrive in London before sunrise. With no implication of the month or season when the story takes place, it is hard to figure out the exact duration of the journey. It is the same as the messenger’s previous trip: he departs before Terce, which is marked by the 'vndernbellé' (mid-morning bell), and reaches Canterbury long before the evensong. If we assume that the day and the night were equally long, the return journey could have taken nearly twelve hours in the modern sense, while the messenger only spent around eight hours to reach Canterbury. It is possible that the return journey is prolonged because of darkness, but the assumption of a much slower average speed during the return journey would challenge the necessity of the archbishop’s arrangement of the relay team. As for his own horse, the messenger might be exaggerating the price that the beast was worth when he cries for it, yet its impressive performance evidences its high quality. The horse has endured intensive work day and night, covering nearly a hundred miles without proper rest. Even so it is not beaten in terms of speed and stamina by a team of nine fresh horses on the return journey until its collapse on London Bridge. It is curious that the messenger did not try to rest his horse before returning London with the archbishop, or appeal for a fresh horse to ride on

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64 Trounce, ed., Athelston, pp. 78-9, ll. 351-5, 381-3.
instead.

The messenger’s lie about the reason for his horse’s death in the third episode also draws critical attention. Richard Horvath perceives the messenger’s pursuit of self-interest reflected in his cunning and deceitful manner towards Wymound, and tags the subplot as a middle-class drama.66 This idea echoes Dickerson’s identification of the poem with a group of Middle English romances that spotlight ‘bourgeois virtues and bourgeois values’ in familiar everyday scenarios for a middle-class audience. The bourgeois virtues are interpreted as ‘canny self-reliance, skill at rustic games, ability at manual labor, and a sharp eye for material profit and loss’.67 It is true that the messenger himself benefits from these missions, but his concerns are more practical than profit-seeking. Just as I have argued above, when the messenger postpones his departure towards Canterbury in the second episode, instead of an untimely display of self-importance, the messenger is more likely to be motivated by his expertise, from which he gains confidence in deciding how to approach the task in an appropriate way. When Wymound offers the messenger plenty of coins as a reward in the third episode, the messenger makes no comment on the most tangible profit in front of him, but raises his request for one of Wymound’s horse. The quality of the earl’s horses must have impressed the messenger, since he asks for none of Alryke’s horses when the archbishop promises to reward him with an income. He probably despises Alryke’s horses, according to their performance on the journey from Canterbury. A good horse is the key equipment for a mounted

67 Dickerson, ‘The Subplot of the Messenger in Athelston’, p. 120-2.
messenger to carry out his tasks efficiently; in this sense, a messenger's personal interest is naturally entangled with his patron's. Therefore the profit he seeks is not confined to the personal level, but extends to the royal and national.

It is quite possible that the anonymous poet himself once worked in the messenger system, or at least was close to a messenger friend who served the royal household: there must be a source for the poet's extensive knowledge of messenger life, and especially for his understanding of a messenger's feelings. If we look back on the scene of the messenger crying for his dead horse, we are actually reading into the messenger's emotional world: "Alla", he sayde, "that I was born!/ Now is my goode hors forlorn,/ Was good at ylke a nede." 68 The language is plain; the loss of a perfect helper has left the messenger in sudden uneasiness and great regret. The messenger's loss of his horse parallels the queen's loss of her unborn son; however, nothing about the queen's feelings after her miscarriage is ever revealed. Probably learning a lesson from her previous failure of intercession, the queen shelters her own emotion with a rapid change in her mediating strategy: she summons the messenger and turns to the archbishop. This indifferent touch conceals the queen's real emotions from the front stage, in contrast to the exposure of the messenger's moaning. If there were any real messengers among the middle-class audience, they would certainly recognise the anxiety and sympathize for the loss. By enhancing the complexity of the subplot the Athelston-poet weakens the main plot into a courtly background, and blurs the boundary between the main characters and this supporting one. It is not impossible that the elaborated subplot was developed later, superimposed onto a rather unfledged narrative regarding the betrayal of sworn-brotherhood and the

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restoration of the aristocratic order. The messenger was probably only supposed to be a minor and nameless figure linking different sections of the original main plot, but now he shares a king's name, enjoys a mysterious origin, performs out of his 'noble' bourgeois virtues, and outshines any other characters in the romance.\textsuperscript{69}
Conclusion

The first chapter has viewed the social status of messengers within the household and their role outside the household in the context of the English communication network. The second chapter has examined the interaction between messengers and their lords for their position in the patronage system. Based on the idea of messengership provided in previous chapters, the final chapter has discerned in Chaucer and in Athelston many realistic details regarding the messengers and their working practices, which reveals the poets' familiarity with the messenger system and conveys the poets' own understanding and criticism with regard to messengership.

If we take the messengers as an integrated group, their status could be roughly identified at the lower middle in the household: frequently alongside yeomen, higher than valets and grooms, but lower than the upper group of serjeants. Yet within the messenger group itself there is huge terminological confusion: messengership could stand in joint titles with other positions from a lowly groom to an eminent serjeant-at-arms. This suggests a loose connection between the title and the person's actual ranking; the title of 'messenger' is more signifying the service itself rather than status of the person. Messengers played a vital role to the communication network, since long-distance communication had to rely on their dedication. The element of speed stood out in some cases, evidenced by the grants of privileges to take horses and the arrangement of horse relays. The use of a horse relay is mirrored in Athelston, when the archbishop plans to make a swift journey to London to Egeland's rescue. Yet different from the fictional smoothness, a
historical messenger could not proceed swiftly without local cooperation to ensure a prompt change of horse en route.

Messengers' journeys were certainly not free of hindrance and danger, and the matter of information security was also a concern to the administrators. The Man of Law's criticism on the messenger's moral weakness and lack of alertness to conspiracy no doubt stands for a voice that would attribute to messengers the major responsibility for the security of information. If the readers had knowledge of some common practices in history that was adopted to ensure authentic deliveries, they would soon recognise a voice different from the Man of Law, probably revealing Chaucer's own thoughts on this matter. The underlying voice stresses the administrator’s responsibility, criticising the king's lack of precaution and fine judgment as the major problem for misinformation. It is highly possible that the Athelston-poet would agree, since the two cases of misinformation never bring any criticism on the messenger who made the delivery.

The interaction between service and patronage reveals its nature as an asymmetrical exchange. A good king was supposed to 'exercise largesse with liberality'.\(^1\) Yet the grant of rewards was not a decision independent of other factors. It was involved in a multilateral game of giving and gaining, as it depended on whether the king held sufficient counters at his disposal and whether he would give priority to fulfilling a certain messenger's expectation. Certainly a messenger could petition for what he was in need of, but it still means that the servant had to wait to be satisfied. Naturally as a result, the form and value of the rewards or benefits was usually out of the messengers' control: the reward was therefore hardly a demonstration of the messenger's own value, but more a result of

\(^1\) Spencer, p. 44.
contemporary political and economical complications. Also there were messengers who had to suffer from the double-edged nature of patronage, risking their life and fortunes with their lords’ gain and loss of authority. However, Athelston, the poet’s middle-class hero, managed to decide on his own what reward to accept, what to refuse, and what else to request with aplomb. Such a sign of free will is among other heroic traits that the poet invests his messenger with; if we are bold enough to take Athelston’s tale as a product of an insider’s view, then we probably see here the self-esteem that medieval messengers wished for themselves.
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCR</td>
<td>Calendar of Close Rolls</td>
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<td>CFR</td>
<td>Calendar of Fine Rolls</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIPM</td>
<td>Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem</td>
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<tr>
<td>CLB</td>
<td>Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPR</td>
<td>Calendar of Patent Rolls</td>
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<tr>
<td>EETS</td>
<td>Early English Text Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>e.s.</td>
<td>Extra series</td>
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<tr>
<td>MLT</td>
<td>The Man of Law's Tale</td>
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<tr>
<td>o.s.</td>
<td>Original series</td>
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<tr>
<td>s.s.</td>
<td>Supplementary series</td>
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<tr>
<td>TNA</td>
<td>The National Archives</td>
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TNA, C 65 (Chancery, parliament rolls)
TNA, E 101 (Exchequer, King’s Remembrancer, accounts various)
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