

Poetic Liminality in the Middle Ages:

The Case of Thomas Hoccleve

Thomas Hoccleve's fifteenth-century work, *The Regiment of Princes*, explores the liminal space the author inhabits in dispensing advice to a Prince. Thomas Hoccleve was a clerk in the precarious court of King Henry V, who was King in a time of political and religious strife from the year 1413 until his death in 1422. This very Henry was immortalized as Prince Hal in Shakespeare's second historical tetralogy, and he sought to keep the order of a Lancastrian Kingdom which his father, Henry Bolingbroke, had established after disposing of his cousin, Richard II, in the year 1400. Hoccleve responds to the uneasy peace assured by Henry V's rule by opening his lengthy prologue with an exit from the physical confines of his bedroom after a sleepless night. He moves through the fields outside of London as a specter, encumbered by "troubly dremes drempt al in wakyng" (109). The author inhabits this ambiguous space in a similarly ambiguous state of consciousness until he is shaken out of his daze by an old man who impugns him to voice his problems. Hoccleve describes his economic woes as the two walk an isolated stretch of land for the length of a day. The ungoverned wilderness allows Hoccleve to confess his troubles at a safe distance from the city and its structure.

This distance is crucial for Hoccleve's explorations of social structure, as the Crown and the city demand that Hoccleve suppress his tongue. Spaces within the city require Hoccleve to keep his "song and wordes yn" (1015), especially while at work in the Privy Seal. Hoccleve's professional voicelessness also bars him from demanding payment from his wealthier patrons. This precarious state is enacted in the poem with Hoccleve's semi-conscious wandering, which

places Hoccleve's mental state in a kind of liminality. Hoccleve pushes the boundaries of space by responding to his intellectual dilemma with a physical removal away from the structure of governance. He later re-enters the social space after prolonged introspection, and in doing so, writes the *Regiment* from a perspective that defies space and time by culling the wisdom of history. Hoccleve's *Regiment* proper largely eschews the limited and complaining perspective of its prologue because it occurs after Hoccleve reconciles his social marginality with the realization that his clerical activity can be a vehicle for progressive action.

In this paper I will argue that Hoccleve uses repeated references to space to place himself in a position of liminality in regards to Prince Henry, the heir apparent to the throne and the man to whom Hoccleve makes his appeal. Liminality refers to the subjective psychological state of one who is powerless against the larger social structure due to a lack of status, power, or top-down authority. This state of liminality creates, as anthropologist Victor Turner writes, "the need for positive anti-structural activities." These anti-structural activities include the process of crossing various "thresholds" in order to overcome "spiritual/psychic dangers through ritual."¹ Hoccleve's condition of liminality arises from the powerlessness he feels in his scribal position, and also owes to the overarching cultural tensions over the legitimacy of the Lancastrian rule. Hoccleve subsequently situates himself outside of the contested social space of the city in order to muse upon his mind's "restlees bysynesse" (1), and performs a series of rituals before returning to his community as a much wiser and empowered writer.

One of the rituals Hoccleve performs on his exploration of his liminality is confession to the Old Man. These confessions, however, are often of a political nature as opposed to personal or

¹ This is actually paraphrased from a Stephen Bigger review of Victor Turner's work.

spiritual. Though Hoccleve admits, “The thoughtful wight is vessel of torment” (81), and he is indeed suffering a personal crisis, Hoccleve’s confessions begin properly with the affirmation of his belief in the sacrament of the altar (380-381). He produces this majority belief early in his text to align himself with the Church and the Lancastrian Rule, as opposed to the disaffected Lollards, who were becoming real thorns in the side of the Church at Hoccleve’s time of writing in 1414. The Old Man notes that Hoccleve’s countenance looks “sumwhat . . . amendid” (388) by this initial admission. This act of alignment politically identifies Hoccleve with the Crown, but also serves a purpose structurally as the admission leaves the Old Man no longer “ful sore agast” (389) of the doleful, disaffected narrator.

The Lollards, also known as the Wycliffites, are an interesting group to note because they were the most vocal proto-Protestant reformists. They were also severely condemned as heretics by the Lancastrians, who were under heavy pressure to support the Church.² Prince Henry’s father, Henry IV, even allowed for a law called *De heretic comburendo*, the Act to Burn Heretics, to be passed by the parliament of 1401. One of the main beliefs of Lollardy was that the clergy and their institutions are unjustified in taxing people and that the Church is ostensibly a large corporation with no moral leadership. Lollards questioned the various rituals and practices of the Church, which they dubbed “superstitions.” Lollards rejected the space that the Church occupied, and rebelled against its power with spiritual retreat, in a similar manner to Hoccleve’s rejection of the State by opening his prologue with a physical retreat.

Hoccleve makes explicitly clear his support of the Church and the Crown in his dialogue with the Old Man, but scholars have recently remarked that, structurally, the prologue offers a tacit

² This information comes from the On-line Reference Book for Medieval Studies (ORB) article, “Religion in Fifteenth-Century England.”

endorsement of some of Lollard tenets. Katherine Little notes in her book, *Confession and Resistance*, that Hoccleve enacts “a retreat from confession as it has been traditionally defined” by confessing “solely personal, private concerns, disconnected from the authority of the institutional church.”³ Hoccleve’s confessions outside of Church walls are indeed acts of resistance, but these acts are masked by his condemnation of John Badby, the Lollard preacher who had been convicted of heresy and burnt into “ashen drie” (285-287) in the year 1410. Hoccleve distances himself from the preacher who rejected both the Church and the Crown in his refusal to “‘discover,’ ‘voice,’ or ‘vomit’—to make his inner contrition apparent by a token,”⁴ but the acknowledgement of this controversial figure brings to the surface of the text Hoccleve’s moral apprehensions over the apparatuses of control at work in the city. Hoccleve’s liminality is further stressed in the section on Badby because he readily admits his faith and allegiance to the governing structures that have proven themselves unreliable and ineffectual.

Tensions between confessions revealed and concealed mark much of Hoccleve’s underlying apprehensiveness in the prologue. Hoccleve remembers very early his work how “Fortunes strook doun thraste estat rial/ Into mescheef” (23-24). He pays mind to fortune’s thrashing of former kingdoms as a way to remind the Lancastrians of the uncertainty of fortune, but repeats the sentiment, generalizing and applying it to the middle class: “In mene estat eek sikirnesse at al/ Ne saw I noon” (26-27). The message is universalized so that nobody escapes fortune’s turns; the middle class is just as susceptible to change and variance. This is a much more palatable idea which reads less threateningly than the initial sentiment. Hoccleve’s social position demands these constrained admissions, especially in the climate of religious and political uncertainty where his

³ Little, Katherine. p 117.

⁴ Little. p 117.

own livelihood was subject to change and variance.

As evinced by his numerous laments of misfortune, Hoccleve's worries arise at this time because his patronage has become less regulated. He is explicitly distraught over a missed payment from the Prince and because he finds it hard to collect. Economic concerns appear early and factor prominently in Hoccleve's decision to address the Prince, but he includes the extended prologue to explain his desperation in a setting outside the Prince's governance to remind the Prince of his limitations as a ruler. The fields outlying London are beyond the control of both the Crown and the Church. While neither Hoccleve nor the Old Man devise plans to overthrow the capital, they both possess the freedom to complain openly about the problems of society.

However, Hoccleve is careful to admit his complacent necessity of the existing social structure. He tells the Old Man he has written and dwelled at the Privy Seal for twenty years, and that he would not be fit for farming or any sort of outdoor labor. Hoccleve admits this embarrassingly unmanly handicap as such:

With plow can I nat medlen ne with harwe,
 Ne woot nat what lond good is for what corn
 And for to lada a cart of fille a barwe,
 To which I nevere used was toforne;
 My bak unbuxum hath swich thing forsworn,
 At instance of wrytynge, his werreyour,
 That stowpynge hath him split with his labour
 (981-986)

The tools and actions for laboring outdoors are completely unknown to the Privy Seal clerk. He knows nothing of farming methods, and he has also been rendered physically unfit by perpetually stooping while at his desk. He describes writing as a supremely taxing activity that requires the extended singular focus of "Mynde, ye, and hand" (997)—in which the mind must always watch "withouten variance" (999) on the activities of the eye and hand, and vice versa (1001). Hoccleve

describes his labor at the Privy Seal as stultifying and restrictive. The labor demands his full attention and that it be held in one place (1005) for extended periods. He also may not sing or speak which makes the labor all the more tedious (1006-1008).

The Privy Seal, with its connection to the Crown, exemplifies the repressive nature of the social structure, and Hoccleve's unvoiced frustrations lead him to idealize places and people who are unconfined by walls or oppressors. He even goes so far as to infer that the laborers he sees outside of his office are much more free of political influence than himself. From his desk at the Privy Seal Hoccleve recounts his numerous sightings of men who "Talken and synge and make game and play" (1011), which especially irritate Hoccleve because they are not physically tethered to any apparatuses. Hoccleve makes use of this idealized concept of the outdoors at the onset of his poem and furthers it by mentioning his jealousy of the day laborers, who are in actuality as much tied to their occupation as Privy Seal clerks are. Hoccleve laments his precarious position because it is explicitly within the political structure, and offers no pretense of freedom as it keeps him out of the sunshine. Outside of irregular payment, being tethered to a desk and rendered speechless is the primary gripe of the Privy Seal clerk.

While Hoccleve's complaints are important to the structure of the *Regiment*, certain questions have arisen about the process of Hoccleve's acknowledgement of his own precarious marginality, and the way he comes to eventually accept and embrace his function in society. These questions center around the character with whom Hoccleve converses. The Old Man initially urges Hoccleve to "tell out al thyn herte" (263), and subsequently advises Hoccleve to "Compleyne unto his excellent noblenesse" (1849) about his missed payments. The Old Man actually seems to exist outside of space and time, as if imaginary, though I cannot entertain the 'ghost advisor' theory at

this time. I defend my reading of the Old Man as 'ageless' or 'timeless' by positing that he inhabits a different liminal area than Hoccleve.

While Hoccleve actively engages with a system that fosters his dissatisfaction and weaknesses, the Old Man engages a more philosophical dilemma between the limitations of knowledge and body. His recitations of Classical wisdom and Scripture are, rather comically, juxtaposed with his trivial complaints against extravagant dress. The Old Man is trapped in a kind of purgatory, the ultimate liminal zone, as the wisdom of the philosophers eases his spirit and guides his actions, yet he repentantly confesses his misspent youth and harps on worldly concerns such as dress and sex.

The Old Man's petitionary attacks against extravagant dress also do something very bizarre, and I am not yet sure the reason, but they reference Hoccleve's audience directly in what is previously assumed to be a closed conversation. He says, "O lords, it sit to yow/ Amende this, for it is for your prow;/ If twixt yow and your men no difference/ Be in array, lesse is your reverence" (445-448). The motivations for including this statement are clearly linked with his ailing personal economic status, but this petition changes the scope of the prologue. The Old Man displays an references an audience outside of Hoccleve, in a manner similar to the way Hoccleve politically identifies with both his interlocutor and his patrons. I also wonder why the Old Man discriminates against people for expressing themselves freely in dress when Hoccleve attempts to express himself freely in verse. This tension between concealed and revealed expression manifests itself in moments such as this where there is an awareness of an audience. Considerations for an audience's tastes take precedence over authorial autonomy. This balance also represents the liminal space that Hoccleve occupies in writing to the Prince, and is seen in the way he simultaneously defers to the

throne while criticizing its administrative failings.

Hoccleve's initial reluctance to speak with the Old Man shows that there is indeed a barrier that Hoccleve keeps closed off from others as a result of his professional voicelessness as if were keeping a secret. However, once Hoccleve admits his malady is "encombrous thoght" (185) after being repeatedly interpellated, the Old Man assumes an authoritative role and instructs Hoccleve, "Do as I shal thee seye" (188). He warns that only "harm and deceit" could follow for those who "wilfully rebelle and disobeye" his advice (190, 196). Hoccleve reacts to these words ambivalently as he does not speak out after the old man advises, "tell out al thyn herte" (263). The Old Man does manage to ingratiate himself with Hoccleve after telling the tales of his misspent youth, which effectively evens the balance of power and their dialogue improves as a result because Hoccleve begins contributing his input.

The Old Man claims that for a youth "Al his devocion and holynesse/ At the taverne is ... To Bachus signe and to the levesel [leafy bush (as inn sign)]/ His youthe him halith, and whan it him happith/ To chirche goon, of nycetee he clappith" (598-602). The tavern is an establishment that is presented in an equally rueful manner to the Privy Seal, except instead of fostering a crippling discipline it gives rise to an abhorrent lack of control. The tavern is presented as a necessary escape for youth that is as compelling as earning a living: "The cause why men oghten thidir goon,/ Nat cause can his wilde steerissh heed/ To folwen it" (603-605). As such the young are painted in a disparaging light, which is an idea that Hoccleve repeats towards the end of the *Regiment* when he advises the Prince to hear council from any man (4881), but later advises against heeding the "perillous" advice of the youth (4947). "Yonge men," he claims, are "more weldy to fighte if they sholde" (4953); a sentiment that promotes the age-discrimination necessary for maintaining

hierarchical order. I feel that since maintaining hierarchical order is especially important in an era of political uncertainty, Hoccleve's discrimination against youth merely serves to emphasize his reverence for tradition and his alignment with the Lancastrians.

The Old Man's admissions about his "recheles" youth (610) mirror Hoccleve's descriptions of his youth in *la Male Regle*, and further signify Hoccleve's mastery of crafting a palatable interiority. Though the Old Man speaks of his youth from a shamefaced standpoint, his descriptions include a touch of debauched nostalgia which may have resonated with his male readership as much as it would today:

In pryde and leccherie was al my thoght.
 No more I hadde set therby or roght
 A wyf or mayde or nonne to deffoule
 Than sheete or pleten at the bal or boule.

Right nyce girles at my retenue
 Had I an heep, wyves and other mo --
 What so they were, I wolde noon eschue
 (648-654)

And though the Old Man proceeds to completely disavow this practice and condemn the conceits of his youth as "ful dirk and blynde" (658), he stirs up this image as a voyeuristic reminiscence of his former virility. The Old Man reveals the crippling power of fortune and time to the younger narrator in the same way that the narrator later expresses to the Prince the unwieldy wheel of fortune. The Old Man painfully admits, "[My friends] me confortyd ay in myn excesse,/ And seide I was a manly man withalle;/ Hir hony wordes tornen me to galle" (719-721), which has got to be a stinging revelation for men of any era to consider. Hoccleve uses these vocalizations to attract the attention of his readership and to invite them to consider their misfortunes alongside the depictions of abject debasement that he presents. Hoccleve iterates many key ideas in the prologue later in the

Regiment through subtle structural subversions and exchanges of authority. He uses this vehicle for implementing his advice to the Prince.

Hoccleve admits that when he first spoke to the Old Man he was “ful mad and spak ful rudely” (758) to him. He blames it on a disseverance from reality, which is actually just a response to the powerlessness that comes from economic uncertainty. Hoccleve admits:

Thogh I nat slepte, yit my spirit mette	[dreamed]
Ful angry dremes; thocht ful bysyly	
vexid my goost so that nothyng wiste I	[know]
What that I to yow spak or what I thoghte,	
But heer and there I myselfen soghte	[sought out myself]
(759-764)	

Hoccleve then begs forgiveness from the Old Man for his impertinence and embraces the Old Man’s presence. Hoccleve hopes to play this role later in his advisement to the Prince. He signifies this by telling the Old Man, “My day of helthe is present, as me thynkith;/ Your confort deepe into myn herte synkith” (776-777)— it is as much the young narrator’s “day of helthe” as it is a time of prosperity for the Lancastrians.

Hoccleve takes much influence from the Old Man when he writes the *Regiment* proper, which largely consists of moral tales culled from the pages of history. The timeless wisdom contained within the body of the text that serves as a mirror for the Prince contrasts the limited perspective of the complaining individual narrator in the prologue. It is interesting that Hoccleve structured his poem in such a way as to extend the prologue to encompass roughly a third of his work and that he also serves as a principle character in order to fully ingratiate himself with his audience. It is as if Hoccleve wants to gain his patronage from within the structure and without. Perhaps because the prologue exists outside of the actual work, and it is a piece of writing that was written outside of, or extraneously to, the piece he was ‘commissioned’ to write, then Hoccleve is

doubly enforcing the idea that a scribe's invisibility should not be confused with non-existence. He includes his presence outside of established structures, such as physical structures of governance, and story-telling structures or genres, to lament the demanding and unfulfilling conditions of his social marginality.

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