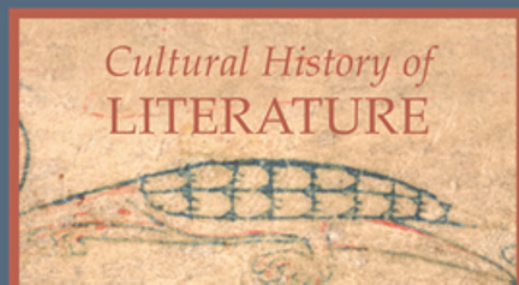CHRISTOPHER CANNON

Middle English Literature

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A Cultural History

CHRISTOPHER CANNON

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Illustrations

Abbreviations

EETS o. s.	Early English Text Society, Original Series
EETS e. s.	Early English Text Society, Extra Series
EETS s. s.	Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series
ELH	*English Literary History*
MWME	*A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, 11 vols [to date], ed. J. B. Severs (vols 1–2), Albert E. Hartung (vols 3–10), Peter G. Beidler (vol. 11), New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967–.
MS	manuscript
MED	*The Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath et al., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1954–.
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, 20 vols, ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989 [1st edn 1888–1933].

A Note on Texts and Quotations

Throughout I have replaced obsolete letters with their modern equivalents. *Thorn* (þ) is replaced with *th*, *yogh* (3) is rendered as *gh*, *g*, *y* or *z* as modern spelling dictates. The letters *i/j* and *u/v* are normalized. Ampersands have been changed to *and*.

I have provided full translations for early Middle English texts (which, unless otherwise indicated, are my own) and marginal glosses for difficult vocabulary and syntax in later texts.

Although my general preference is for the critical and standard edition of a Middle English text, where such an edition is difficult to obtain I have often turned to more widely available editions; where later texts still employ a difficult Middle English (as in the case, say, of the poems of the *Gawain*-poet) I have turned to an edition that normalizes spelling according to the conventions described above.

All quotations from *The Canterbury Tales* are from Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann, London: Penguin, 2005. All quotations from *Troilus and Criseyde* are from Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Barry Windeatt, London: Penguin, 2003. All quotations from other poems by Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from *Piers Plowman* are taken from William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-text*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, 2nd edn, London: J. M. Dent, 1995 (first pubd 1978). All quotations from the C-text are taken from William Langland, *Piers Plowman: An Edition of the C-text*, ed. Derek Pearsall, London: Edward Arnold, 1978, and marked as 'C' in the text.

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Introduction

The word 'culture' has extremely wide reference, and this history of Middle English literature relies on what are usually taken to be two very different definitions of the term. The first derives from the theories of Karl Marx (1818–83) and, in particular, his insistence that 'the economic structure of society' produced all other 'forms of social consciousness' and the 'intellectual life process in general'.[1] 'Culture' in this sense is all the 'legal, political, religious, aesthetic, or philosophic . . . forms' projected out of this economic foundation, so much 'superstructure', which, whatever importance may be attributed to it by individuals or society, is fully determined by – and only ever completely explained in terms of – this 'material' base.[2] The second theory of 'culture' I subscribe to in these pages seems the near inverse of this view, and it was articulated with particular clarity by a contemporary of Marx, the poet and critic Matthew Arnold (1822–88). For Arnold, 'culture' was not the product of an economic structure or even the whole of a society, but, rather, the creation of some unitary and magnificent 'individual' and his capacities of 'right reason'.[3] This 'culture' is neither basic nor material but, rather, the 'perfection' achieved by a truly unique person who, in his turn, has helped to perfect a larger world; it is 'an inward condition of the mind and spirit, not an outward set of circumstances' – to rephrase the view in Marxist terms – an element of the superstructure with sufficient productive power to alter the base.[4]

Since there is nothing obvious about how such diametrically opposed definitions may be either mutually illuminating or useful in a history of Middle English literature, I want to begin with a practical example that generates the necessary common ground. This example will also be useful for surveying some of the particular interpretative and methodological problems involved in relating literature to culture, however the latter term is defined. My text is a short love lyric by Chaucer, usually called *To Rosemounde* after the woman it addresses. It is a straightforward ballade (in eight-line stanzas, rhyming *ababbcbc*, of which the last line is a refrain),

accomplished in every way, but perhaps most striking for the image of the lover with which its third stanza begins:

> Nas never pyke* walwed* in galauntyne   *pike / rolled in, wrapped*
> As I in love am walwed and ywounde,*   *wound up*
> For which ful ofte I of myself devyne
> That I am trewe Tristam the secounde.
> My love may not refreyde* nor affounde,*   *grow cold / turn numb*
> I brenne* ay in an amorous plesaunce.   *burn*
> Do what you lyst,* I wyl your thral* be founde,   *you wish / servant*
> Thogh ye to me ne do no daliaunce.
>
>   (ll. 17–24)

The comparison of a lover to something as mundane and messy as a fish covered in sauce is imaginatively daring, but time has also rendered the image obscure, since few modern readers will know what Chaucer meant by 'galentyne'.[5] It is easy to find help in contemporaneous documents, however, and London, British Library, MS Harley 4016, a cookbook compiled around 1450, gives the following recipe for 'pike . . . in galentyne':

> Take browne brede, and stepe it in a quarte of vinegre, and a pece of wyne for a pike, and quarteren of pouder canell and drawe it thorgh a streynour skilfully thik, and cast it in a potte, and lete boyle; and cast there-to pouder peper, or ginger, or of clowes, and lete kele. And then take a pike, and seth him in good sauce, and take him up, and lete him kele a litul; and ley him in a boll for to cary him yn; and cast the sauce under him and above him, that he be al y-hidde in the sauce; and cary him whether ever thou wolt.[6]

> [*pece*: cup   *quarteren*: quart   *kele*: cool   *seth*: boil]

This would at first seem a happy association for the definition of 'culture' I cited from Marx, since it appears to return the poem at its most extravagantly literary (the point of its most unusual image) directly to its base: to place this recipe next to Chaucer's poem is to work back, along the chain of production, from one of the more striking poetic thoughts Chaucer ever had to the kind of food that would have inspired such thought because Chaucer ate it. Less happy for this association, however, is the date of this cookbook, since, at fifty years' remove, it cannot itself count as a witness to the methods of food production that inspired *To Rosemounde*. There is in fact a recipe for '*lampray* in galentyne', very like the one I have just quoted for a 'pike', in a cookbook whose compilation almost certainly preceded *To Rosemounde*, the *Diversa Servicia* (*c*.1381).[7] And yet, even if this recipe makes it clear that the kind of 'galentyne' Chaucer imagines was certainly being produced by kitchens in his day, things remain untidy since the earliest evidence we have of the material practice in which we

have sought to root Chaucer's image – that is, the saucing of a *pike* in a 'galentyne' – turns out to be that image. We could say that such untidiness is no more than a side-effect of the impoverished record of culinary practice in fourteenth-century England, but we must then also recognize that surviving recipes are part and parcel of that poverty, texts designed to guide preparation rather than descriptions of actual practice, no matter how faithfully followed at least one level removed from actual cooking in a kitchen. In fact, what the association of *To Rosemounde* and these cookbooks shows best of all is that literature is not only as close to the base as any recipe, but, for that very reason, there is no reason whatsoever that literature could not guide cooking practice – that someone accustomed to saucing only 'lampray in galentyne', as suggested in the *Diversa Servicia*, might wish to sauce a 'pike' in a 'galentyne' because he or she had read *To Rosemounde*.

The importance of such untidy relationships was in fact quickly evident to Marx himself and, not long after he made the stark distinction between superstructure and base that I quoted above, he recognized that ideas and imagination were necessarily a part of material production ('At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence had already existed ideally').[8] Marxist thinkers particularly concerned with literature have further troubled this distinction by noticing that language is fundamental to both superstructure and base, for it is, at once, the vehicle for all ideas and a form 'conditioned . . . by the social organization of the participants involved and . . . the immediate conditions of their interaction'.[9] It is therefore also a Marxist view that ideology 'may not be divorced from . . . material reality'.[10] This is also true, as Louis Althusser explained, because ideology, or the 'representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence',[11] necessarily resides in concrete 'practices' and 'rituals', in the institutions, or, as he termed them, 'ideological apparatuses', such as the church, school, family, or laws which foster, preserve and inculcate such representations in the minds of individuals.[12] But, even as he explained this, Althusser also noted that the positing of superstructure and base was an important step in the description of their interpenetration, that the division of culture into 'levels' was, in fact, a 'great theoretical advantage' in Marxist analysis.[13] On the one hand, such division makes it possible to discern and describe the various ways that our abstract imaginings are *in fact* rooted in the real conditions of our existence (all those ways that the base does in fact produce the superstructure), while, on the other hand, such division also makes it possible to notice the way that our

imaginings may alter concrete conditions (all of the ways that there is a 'reciprocal action of the superstructure' on the base).[14]

We may identify the superstructure and base of a culture, in other words, not only to keep these levels apart, but to describe their rich, uneven and constant intermixture *as* a culture. And if we begin again with the image of the 'pike in galentyne' in *To Rosemounde*, looking now not for the base that produced its imagery but, rather, for the variety of cultural transactions in which that image participated, what we quickly discover is not only the possibility that literary representation could have preceded certain techniques of cookery (as above), but the surprisingly literary form that medieval cookery sometimes took. This is particularly obvious in the menus that survive from this period,[15] where courses are often said to have concluded with a *sotelte* [subtlety], often further identified only by the name of an animal, 'aquila' [eagle], say, or a 'lebarde' [leopard].[16] To look at a variety of such descriptions is to realize that these were a kind of sculpture in which cooked food as well as the parts of animals discarded during cooking (feathers, skin or hair, say) were reassembled in the form of some animal not commonly eaten (a leopard or eagle, say), or simply reassembled to present what had now been cooked as if it were still alive. Where the figure was human, as such subtleties often were, dyed or painted sugar was used as the basic material,[17] and, as in the menu for the feast celebrating the installation of John Stafford as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1443, such figures were often presented as a kind of meaningful tableau:

> A sotelte. Seint Andrew, sitting on an hie Auter of a-state, with bemes of golde; afore him knelyng, the Bisshoppe in pontificalibus; his Croser kneling behinde him, coped.[18]
>
> [*hie*: high   *Auter*: altar   *a-state:* state   *pontificalibus:* bishop's ceremonial dress   *croser*: bearer of bishop's staff   *coped*: dressed ceremonially]

Because we know about them from menus, it is fair to assume that these figures were not only a part of actual meals, but that, in their less elaborate forms, they were eaten. And yet such figures are also well described as *allegorical*, since, as in such literature, they represent one thing by means of another. We might therefore wish to say that the *sotelte* is an instance in which medieval cookery borrows from the literary or visual arts, as if the poetic capacity to represent, say, a lover as a 'pike in galentyne' (in this sense a technique of the superstructure) had filtered down to kitchens. And yet, this very image must then count as an instance of reciprocity in such relationships, since, in the light of these *soteltes*, it is possible to see that a

'pike in galentyne' is also a figurative foodstuff, for it transforms a cooked pike, on a plate, into a fish once again 'swimming' about in liquid ('cast the sauce under him and above him, that he be al y-hidde in the sauce; and cary him whether ever thou wolt'). When Chaucer imagines himself as such a fish, also swimming about in this sauce, he is not only creating an image out of something he might have eaten, but adapting a kind of figuration *already* native to cookery to a particular poetic purpose.

A Marxist cultural history worthy of the name is therefore dedicated to the discovery and careful description of this sort of complex transaction, and, that being the case, it is also true that where such transactions involve movements in which the superstructure actually and verifiably alters the base (where, say, a poem can be shown to have really changed practice) the Arnoldian model of culture has emerged as the truth that *Marxist* analysis has discovered. Such a theoretical convergence and examples that prove it true have not featured very largely in cultural criticism of late, nor have they been much noticed in literary history on the whole, but they did once have a spokesman in Raymond Williams, whose largest contribution to the Marxist study of literature was probably the long-term insistence that human creativity necessarily played a key part in historical change. Williams sometimes made this point by discovering the Arnoldian claim in Marx's own writing, noticing, in particular, all of the times and all of the ways in which Marx's theories were predicated on the human capacity for (as Marx himself put it) 'creating something that has never yet existed'.[19] But Williams also insisted that Marxist cultural history necessarily described not only all those ways in which 'art reflects its society', but also all those ways in which 'art creates, by new perceptions and responses, elements which the society, as such, is not able to realize'.[20] Rather than identify 'base' or 'superstructure', Williams preferred to regard culture as a 'totality' comprised of activities and processes,[21] and, rather than attempting to establish the priority of 'political, economic, and "social" arrangements' over 'literature, art, science, and philosophy', he preferred to insist on the 'genuine parity' of these elements, seeking above all to describe the 'patterns' and 'relationships between these patterns', the 'unexpected identities and correspondences' as well as 'discontinuities' that assemble these disparate 'elements' that comprised 'a whole way of life'.[22]

A book focused on a literature, as this one is, can only hope to keep the complexity of this whole in mind, since so many of these processes, so much of the way of medieval life, extended far beyond the precincts of literary writing. But the structure of what follows is meant to give some emphasis to each one of the various relationships that may obtain between

literature and a larger culture. Chapters 1 and 2 form a kind of balanced and oppositional pair, the first describing many of the ways in which Middle English literature was fundamentally shaped by techniques of material production or 'technology', the second offering as detailed an account as possible of all the ways in which Middle English literature was sufficiently 'insurgent' to have brought about real social or political change. Chapters 3 and 4 tread the middle ground between these two extremes, showing, first, in a chapter on 'statecraft', how the political and the literary can overlap and converge, and, second, in a chapter on 'place', how certain sorts of writing were embedded in social circumstances and institutions. The book concludes by describing the complex process by which Middle English literature actually pulled free from the 'jurisdiction' of other areas of culture, actively working to define itself as an autonomous practice, thereby giving us the notion of 'literature' that we still use today. Although chapter 5 describes this emergence rather than its consequences, sustained attention to this momentous change makes clear why Middle English writing must be one of the places we look if we wish to understand why cultural study of this kind is needed: for one of the more distinctive and lasting contributions of Middle English literature is the idea (as distinct from the reality) that 'art' is a separate and independent cultural sphere.

   This book is not in itself revolutionary, and my highest aspiration has been to tell a different sort of story. My chapter titles represent the boldest departure from more traditional literary history, and I have hoped that these categories might themselves disrupt customary connections, while also allowing the less familiar works of Middle English literature to jostle the more familiar, and, in these new circumstances, to show the latter in a new light. Because I want this book to be useful to those who are also reading Middle English according to the traditional syllabus, however, I have used more standard terms as sub-titles within individual chapters. For this same reason, I have tried to cite what I take to be certain classics of scholarship in the field (criticism that, while old, offers insights that seem to me undimmed) while attempting, in so far as I was able, to cite and make use of the most innovative recent scholarship.

   If this book does make a contribution to Middle English scholarship, I hope it will be to underscore the need for other, more thorough, revaluations of the literature of this period by way of demanding theories of culture. To my mind, such revaluations will go the furthest towards satisfying what Elizabeth Salter so memorably defined as the goal of any student of this period: 'we should . . . wish . . . to extend . . . rather than limit the number of medieval English poems which may be expected to

interest and move us', and we may do this best by refusing to allow for any 'safe area', by actively resisting our own literary tastes 'as they have been shaped by post-Renaissance poetry', relying, instead, on our 'imaginative curiosity', always making a 'conscious effort . . . to widen more our reach'.[23] Many historical and analytical methods would count as such an effort, but I believe that cultural study is uniquely effective in the activity of such widening.

1

Technology

During a visit to the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exhibition of 1900 in Paris, the historian Henry Adams was alarmed by the quiet force of the dynamo that confronted him, its 'huge wheel, revolving within an arm's-length at some vertiginous speed, and barely murmuring'.[1] Although he was aware that the dynamo seemed so powerful because he could not understand it, the mystery of this 'silent and infinite force' (361) was not nearly so worrying to Adams as its novelty, that here was something that really defeated the historian's capacity to 'arrange sequences . . . of cause and effect' (362–3), a 'sudden irruption of forces totally new' (363). Turning for comfort to what he took to be a more explicable sort of force, Adams found himself equally struck in France by the quiet power of the Virgin Mary: in this omnipresent symbol, he felt, was an energy whose operations he could track but whose effects were no less impressive than those of the dynamo ('All the steam in the world could not, like the Virgin, build Chartres') (368). Although he did not press the point, Adams meant the stark contrast to express an overwhelming anxiety about the post-medieval world and its technological direction; he was worried that humankind had finally unleashed forces it could not control, that in the place of building in the name of human warmth and feeling, growth and accomplishment occurred at the behest of machines. And yet, a history of the Virgin that was less techno-phobic might have realized that there was no difference between the turning of a turbine that generates electricity and the lifting of heavy stones that make a cathedral, that the force Adams perceived in the dynamo and identified with the Virgin (those mechanical and architectural innovations which made cathedral-building possible) was, *mutatis mutandis*, also technological – a deployment of mechanical power that made building possible in so far as it magnified human strength and reach.[2]

Although the profusion of machines, and their increasing sophistication, in the last two centuries makes us think of our own period as the age of technology, the Middle Ages in the West can be described as 'the first industrial revolution', the place and moment in which machines were

first put to wide and systematic use.[3] The stirrup, which greatly increased the power of mounted warriors, and the heavy plough with coulter, share and mould-board (the better to turn heavy earth), were brought into wide application in early eighth-century France.[4] At roughly the same period the horseshoe was introduced and a harness for a team of horses (vastly stronger than the oxen which had been used until that point), and the 'three-field system' of crop rotation (considerably more productive than simple autumn and winter plantings) transformed agricultural production (and increased yields by 50 per cent).[5] The Utrecht Psalter, produced near Rheims some time between 816 and 834, contains an illumination that shows the use of a mechanical crank (a device for transforming reciprocal motion – pedalling, pulling and pushing – into continuous rotary motion).[6] Evidence of a water-powered mill for the manufacture of cloth in 983 in Tuscany counts as the first use of water power for something other than grinding grain and involved the 'first useful application of the cam' (a notched or eccentrically shaped wheel which converts circular to alternating or intermittent motion).[7] At the end of the twelfth century windmills were coming into use in Normandy and England.[8] The spinning wheel appears in Germany in 1280.[9] There is a mechanical clock in Dunstable Priory in 1283.[10] The printing press employing moveable metal type is invented by Gutenberg in the 1440s and arrives in Britain in 1475.[11]

None of these transformative devices, however, can be classed as an invention of the medieval West. The heavy plough was already in limited use in the Po Valley of Italy in the first century AD;[12] windmills were simply an adaptation of the ancient technology of the watermill; the mechanical clock was long preceded by the water clock;[13] the cam was known in ancient Greece;[14] the stirrup was known in India in the second century AD,[15] the crank was in use in China in AD 31,[16] and books were being printed in China in the ninth century.[17] What in fact distinguished the European Middle Ages from the rest of the world was the eagerness with which it embraced devices and structures that had the capacity to bend natural forces to human use, and how, having happened upon such capacities, medieval culture elaborated itself by creating more and more opportunities for their widespread diffusion. A figure often cited in histories to prove this point, and certainly impressive enough in its own right, is that although the watermill was known in ancient times it is almost never referred to until 1086, when *Domesday Book* (the great survey of land and possessions commissioned by William the Conqueror) counts 5624 mills in some 3000 different English communities.[18]

The novelty that rendered the West so substantially different from the rest of the world, and which still accounts for the importance of technology in its culture, Lynn White has argued, is a particular, and defining, attitude toward human labour. Where the application of brute force had acquired extremely negative connotations in Greco-Roman antiquity, when much physical labour was performed by slaves, early medieval Christianity revalued such work – as, indeed, it revalued servitude – as a positive spiritual pursuit.[19] The transformation is well marked in the *Regula Monachorum* (*c.*530–40), the widely influential monastic rule written by Benedict of Nursia (d. 547), where manual labour is placed at the centre of piety and a fully Christian life ('Idleness is the enemy of the soul. The brethren, therefore, must be occupied at stated hours in manual labour' [Otiositas inimica est animae; et ideo certis temporibus occupari debent fratres in labore manuum]), and labour was also equated with the act of worship in the general category that included both, the *opus dei* ('work of God').[20] This valuation was given more systematic articulation by the Benedictine monk Theophilus, who, in the *De Diversis Artibus* (1122–3), claimed that all mechanical devices (from kilns to blast furnaces) and crafts of all kinds (from painting to glass-making) flowed from 'the power and the guidance of the Holy Spirit' [magisterio et auctoritate Spiritus sancti].[21] The notion that labour was a particularly Christian virtue is also captured neatly in a pictorial tradition that represents the virtue of temperance in a figure whose capacities for measurement and regulation are represented by the mechanical devices ranged round her: in an illustration of 1450 she is shown with a clock on her head, a bit and bridle in her mouth, holding eyeglasses and reins, with her feet resting on a windmill (fig. 1).[22] The aspirational nature of the machine in such a culture is best captured in a story about a Benedictine monk from the period just before 1066, told by William of Malmesbury (1080–1142) in his *Gesta Regum Anglorum*:

> [Æthelmær] was a good scholar, advanced in years by now, though in his first youth he had taken a terrible risk: by some art, I know not what, he had fixed wings to his hands and feet, hoping to fly like Daedalus, whose fable he took to be true. Catching the breeze from the top of a tower, he flew for the space of a stade and more; but with the violence of the wind and the eddies, and at the same time his consciousness of the temerity of his attempt, he faltered and fell, and ever thereafter he was an invalid and his legs were crippled. He himself used to give as a reason for his fall that he forgot to fit a tail on his hinder parts.
>
> [Is erat litteris. . . . bene imbutus, aeuo maturus, immanem audatiam prima iuuentute conatus: nam pennas manibus et pedibus haud scio qua

Fig. 1 Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS Laud 570, fol. 16r., showing Temperance, with a clock on her head, a bit and bridle in her teeth, reins in her right hand, eyeglasses in her left hand, resting her feet, which wear spurs, on a windmill. Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

> innexuerat arte, ut Dedali more uolaret, fabulam pro uero amplexus, collectaque e summo turris aura spatio stadii et plus uolauit. Sed uenti et turbinis uiolentia, simul et temerarii facti conscientia, tremulus cecidit, perpetuo post haec debilis et crura effractus. Ipse ferebat causam ruinae quod caudam in posteriori parte oblitus fuerit.][23]

Æthelmær's 'art' has no direct relation to the more successful modern devices for mechanical flight, but even more visibly than for the Virgin and the dynamo, the continuity in hope and method is clear: non-human

power is used to augment labour so that a person may wildly transcend his physical limitations.

This embrace of technology is not without its paradoxes, for what begins as a valuing of labour in religious life becomes, in the end, an embrace of a wide variety of labour-*saving* devices. And yet this makes the medieval Western embrace of technology an ideology entirely worthy of the name, ideas about that world that not only determined the way it was perceived, but which are themselves powerful enough to substitute themselves for (and therefore even conceal) the actions they promote and produce. We might also seek deeper material causes for particular technological innovations (the general pressures of population growth and settlement which led to the improvement of the plough, the particular necessities of warfare which made the stirrup so valuable for the military advantage it gave), but, in describing the machines themselves, we have gone far enough to understand the various ways that Middle English writing might be shaped by technology. For while it is too much to say that Middle English writing was a product of the ideology I have described, the kinds of writing we have, the subjects it treated, and, most of all, the quantity that has survived were all deeply affected by the Western fascination with technology.

Romance

It is, fittingly, the kind of writing we tend to call romance that would have been impossible were it not for the infatuation with technology that led medieval Western culture to embrace the stirrup. Such writing has been described as the 'self-portrayal of feudal knighthood with its mores and ideals', and technological innovation sits at the root of any such representation because it created the fundamental social role that was so portrayed (the mounted warrior, *chevalier* – from French *cheval* for horse – or knight).[24] Until recently 'feudalism' was understood to be a fairly rigid social and political system wholly organized around knighthood: certain favoured subjects of a king or overlord were given the right to farm and live on a particular tract of land in exchange for services rendered 'in respect' of that land, and the most important of these services were military, either defending or assisting in the campaigns undertaken by that king or overlord.[25] More recent scholarship has shown, however, that feudalism 'was a pretty fugitive affair', with enormous variation over time and, from very early on, the possibility that a feudal tenant might be 'allowed to pay' his overlord rather than to provide him with knight service.[26] It is also clear that the relationship between concrete or 'real' versions of feudalism and literature make it wrong, particularly early on, to describe the latter as a

'self-portrayal': in many cases it is clear that literary accounts of feudalism actually preceded the social structures they purport to describe.[27] On the other hand, the development of a sizeable body of literature in order to celebrate the activities of mounted combat was an important social change and is itself one consequence of the transformative power of the stirrup.

The stirrup also thoroughly revolutionized warfare because it made it possible for a rider to brace himself as he attacked, 'delivering the blow not with his muscles but with the combined weight of himself and his charging stallion'.[28] The diffusion of this technology took some time, and while the stirrup began to be used in France in the eighth century, the mounted, braced lance was not employed widely in combat until the eleventh century,[29] but it is in this period that a celebratory literature first began to emerge. One of the earliest such works is the French *Song of Roland*, a text that also plays a significant part in the cultural history of England since, as legend has it, one of the soldiers of William the Conqueror, Taillefer, sang the *Song* to inspire the Norman troops on the eve of their campaign against the English in 1066.[30] This poem's celebration of heroism and sacrifice in battle is an exemplary instance of the *chanson de geste*, and William's success at Hastings ensured that this poem became a part of English history (the oldest surviving manuscript of the *Roland* is Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 23), but it is also a text celebrating exactly the sort of mounted combat which produced that success ('Here is how a knight, armed and astride a good horse, ought to show his worth' [Itel valor deit aveir chevaler / Ki armes portet e en bon cheval set]),[31] for it is not too much to say that the Norman Conquest was made possible by the stirrup.[32] The records make clear that the Anglo-Saxons had the stirrup, and their soldiers certainly made use of horses: William of Jumièges writes that, when Harold Godwineson heard that William of Normandy had landed with a fighting force near Hastings in 1066, having 'gathered innumerable English forces' [contracta Anglorum innumera multitudine], he hastened to the coast by 'riding through the night' [tota nocte equitans].[33] But these facts are themselves a way of illustrating that technology is not so much a particular innovation as the willingness to exploit it, for when the Anglo-Saxons encountered the invading force of William the Conqueror, as the Bayeux Tapestry dramatically illustrates (fig. 2), they 'drew themselves up in very close order . . . abandoning the aid of horses' [protinus equorum ope relicta cuncti pedites constitere densius conglobati].[34]

This decision was certainly not the only factor in the defeat of the Anglo-Saxon force – Harold and his troops had just seen off a Norse invasion at Stamford Bridge in the North – but, even through its partisan attempt to emphasize the losses suffered on the Norman side, the *Anglo-Saxon*