

THE CLERK'S TALE: CIVIC WRITING IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY LONDON*

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In 1444, the wardens of the London Goldsmiths' Company made a decision to fundamentally reorganise their archives. They observed that the company's old accounts, 'made in times past', were not now 'of record' because they had been 'written in smale [quires] and in other scrowles of no value'. Over the years these piecemeal items had been lost, disorganised, and generally 'put in oblivion', and were of little use to the present governors of the company. In order to solve this problem, the wardens ordered that from henceforth all their records should be entered into a new book, bought specifically for that purpose, so that they 'may be the more opynly knowyn, and remain of Recorde withynne the Craft of Goldsmythes for evermore'.¹ For the wardens, the integrity and functionality of their archive depended on their records being written regularly, kept safely, and gathered together in one place. Through this system of centralised record-keeping, the company aimed to create authoritative and reliable repositories of information that would not only reflect the good order of their present government, but also provide a useful model and a valuable resource for times to come.

However, although the practice of compiling all the company's records into specially designated books may have imposed a physical uniformity on the archives, it did not necessarily follow that the *contents* of these books would be any more accurate or authoritative than the disorganised papers the wardens had so roundly criticised. Indeed, although the Goldsmiths' Company record books may look orderly and appear full, they are not as reliable as they make claims to be. Following the influential work of Natalie Zemon Davis and others, medieval and early modern historians have been increasingly alert to the 'creative' nature of documentary records, recognising that they are not always objective accounts of events, but that they could be (and often were) manipulated to serve particular ends.² Oftentimes, archival documents do not simply record what happened, but rather 'what someone thought should happen, hoped would happen, wanted to pretend had happened – and yet sometimes had not happened at all, or at least not as recorded'.³ These 'fictions in the archive' then become the subject of historical analysis in themselves: and archival records are understood not as repositories of objective fact, but rather as evidence of how early modern

¹ Walter Sherburne Prideaux, *Memorials of the Goldsmiths' Company: being gleanings from their records between the years 1335 and 1815* (2 vols., London, 1896-7), vol. 1, pp. 20-21.

² Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the archives: pardon tales and their tellers in sixteenth-century France* (Stanford, 1987); Shannon McSheffrey, 'Detective fiction in the archives: court records and the uses of law in late medieval England', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 65 (2008); Arlette Farge, *The allure of the archives* (Trans. Thomas Scott-Railton, New Haven, 2013); Frances E. Dolan, *True relations: reading, literature, and evidence in seventeenth-century England* (Philadelphia, 2013).

³ McSheffrey, 'Detective fiction in the archives', 66.

people created, shaped, and used documents in different contexts. Such an approach to the early modern archives can tell us much about the complex web of obligations, relationships, and motivations that lay behind the production of documentary records in the first instance, and that shaped how they were, changed, and manipulated used over time.

This article brings these considerations to bear on a case study of a single document, a property lease written into the Goldsmiths' Company record books in the mid-sixteenth century, which was subsequently 'proved' to have been created in unusual circumstances and so was deemed invalid. The details of this record, its creators, and the controversy surrounding it are described in a number of depositions now held in the archives of the Court of Requests. One of the key figures in the court case was Ralph Robynson, clerk of the Goldsmiths' Company, and author of the document in question. His deposition, along with statements from various other members of the Goldsmiths' Company, offer a rare glimpse into the complex circumstances surrounding the creation and use of a seemingly 'ordinary' document. Taken together, these statements build up a picture of the social dimensions of record-keeping in early modern London.

By focusing on a single example of clerical malpractice, the case is made that we need to focus more on the people behind the creation of institutional records in order to better understand the social, political, and cultural meanings of the documents that they produced. Historians of the medieval period have long recognised the importance of clerks, scribes, and scribes as both literary agents and political actors, whose writings were inextricably intertwined with external events, relationships, and circumstances.⁴ Although there has been some growing interest in 'non-literary' writers in the early modern period, secular clerks have not yet featured prominently in this historiography.⁵ This article argues that early modern

⁴ Linne R. Mooney and Estelle Stubbs, *Scribes and the city: London Guildhall clerks and the dissemination of Middle English literature, 1375-1425* (York, 2013); Mooney, 'Locating scribal activity in late medieval London', in Margaret Connolly and Linne R. Mooney (eds.), *Design and distribution of late medieval manuscripts in England* (York, 2008); Matthew Davies, "'Monuments of honour": clerks, histories and heroes in the London livery companies', in H. Kleineke (ed.), *Parliament, personalities and power: papers presented to Linda S. Clark* (Woodbridge, 2011); Malcolm Richardson, *Middle-class writing in late medieval London* (London, 2011); Mary C. Erler, 'The Guildhall Library, Robert Bale, and the writing of London history', *Historical Research* (2015).

⁵ For studies of notary publics in Europe and the Americas see Laurie Nussdorfer, *Brokers of public trust: notaries in early modern Rome* (Baltimore, 2009) and her contribution to this present volume; Kathryn Burns, 'Notaries, truth, and consequences', *The American Historical Review* vol. 110, no 2 (2005). For England, see Andrew Butcher, 'The functions of script in the speech community of a late medieval town, c.1300-1550', in Julia Crick and Alexandra Walsham (ed.), *The uses of script and print, 1300-1700* (Cambridge, 2004); Keith Wrightson, *Ralph Taylor's summer: a scrivener, his city, and the plague* (Newhaven, 2011); Piers Cain, 'Robert

clerks are just as deserving of attention as their medieval forebears. The sixteenth century saw a widespread transformation in the ways that information was gathered, an increase in record-keeping at a local and national level, and the growth of vernacular print and textual production.⁶ These changes especially affected civic institutions, companies, and societies after the Reformation.⁷ The status of clerks working within these institutions altered accordingly, as they sought to gain employment, patronage, and financial support in the shifting political networks of early modern London.⁸ By recognising clerks as political and literary agents, and exploring their wider activities and relationships, we are able to better understand the layered meanings of institutional records, recovering a sense of early modern archives as socially constructed, rather than neutral repositories of historical fact.

I

QUESTIONING THE ARCHIVE

The court case that forms the basis of this article comes from the archives of the Court of Requests, and is dated 1573.⁹ The defendant was Dame Joyce Wilford, widow of the deceased goldsmith and officer of the Royal Mint, Sir Thomas Stanley. The plaintiffs were the wardens of the Goldsmiths' Company. The dispute concerned the lease of a house on Maiden Lane, London, a property owned by the Goldsmiths' Company that had lately been occupied by Stanley and his wife. After Stanley's death, the house had been occupied by Wilford alone. In 1573, the company wardens wished to lease the house to a new tenant, but Wilford refused to move out. She claimed that she and Stanley had been granted a thirty-year lease of the house by the Goldsmiths' Company in October 1557, and that this lease was still valid. To settle the dispute, the company wardens turned to their archives and consulted their official record book. Sure enough, there they found an entry noting the agreement for a lease; it appeared to have been the last item of business at a meeting of the company's Court of

Smith and the reform of the archives of the city of London, 1580-1623', *The London Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1987-8).

⁶ Ann Blair, *Too much to know: managing scholarly information before the modern age* (New Haven; London, 2010).

⁷ Paul Slack, *From reformation to improvement: public welfare in early modern England* (Oxford, 2009).

⁸ Joseph P. Ward, *Metropolitan communities: trade guilds, identity, and change in early modern London* (Stanford, California; 1997), 86-91.

⁹ London, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), REQ 2/43/88. The depositions in this court case are unpaginated. When quoting, I have identified the 'author' of each deposition to allow the document to be identified.

Assistants on 21 October 1557.¹⁰ The lease clearly specified that the house on Maiden Lane had been let to Stanley and his wife for a term of thirty years. But there was something strange about it. It was written in their clerk Ralph Robynson's neat, distinctive handwriting. This would not in itself have been remarkable – were it not for the fact that, on the afternoon of 21 October 1557, Robynson had not yet been acting as the Goldsmiths' Company clerk.

The wardens recalled that Robynson had in fact been *elected* clerk on 21 October, but did not officially start his record-keeping duties until the next company meeting three days later, on 24 October. All of the entries up to and including those of the meeting on 21 October had been written into the company's book by the outgoing clerk, Roger Mundy, before he handed over the records to his successor. The lease of the house to Stanley and his wife looked incongruous because it appeared in Robynson's handwriting at the bottom of a page where every other entry was written by Mundy. The wardens noticed this discrepancy immediately, and it gave them grounds to question the validity of the lease in court.

[IMAGE]

In the depositions that they gave to the Court of Requests, the company wardens recalled their version of events. Nicholas Johnson testified that Stanley had indeed petitioned the Goldsmiths' Company for a lease of the house on Maiden Lane on the morning of 21 October 1557, but he remembered that another warden, Sir Martin Bowes, had dismissed the issue, saying 'let this matter alone and we will talke of it another tyme'. Stanley's request was accordingly set aside, and other items of business were dealt with, including the election of a new company clerk. As Johnson remembered it, the current clerk, Roger Mundy, 'was an old man', and so 'they did chose... Raphe Robynsone' to take his place, agreeing that he would start work the following week. This was the last item on the agenda, and after Robynson had been formally chosen and elected clerk, everyone departed for home. Jasper Fisher, another warden who had been present on that day, confirmed Johnson's version of events, recalling that 'one Mundy was clark in the ffore nonne of the said day', and 'the said Robynson' was elected clerk 'in the after noonne of the said daye'. Fisher then explained that Stanley's lease 'was entred amongst the rest of the said grauntes or matters' recorded by Mundy, but 'was of the said Robynsons hand' – an anomaly that had alerted the wardens to the suspicious nature of the record in the first place and that, he argued, was proof of the invalidity of the document.

¹⁰ London, Goldsmiths' Hall, Goldsmiths' Company Court Minutes (hereafter GCCM), book K, part 1, p. 6.

When asked how the lease came to be entered into the record book if it had not been agreed upon in the company court, the wardens all denied any knowledge of it. The only person who knew for sure what had happened was Robynson himself. At the time of the court case in 1573, Robynson was 52 years old, and was still acting as company clerk. He gave a detailed deposition in which he explained his own version of events. He claimed that a day or two *after* the company meeting on 21 October 1557, he was summoned to the house of the prominent goldsmith and company warden, Sir Martin Bowes. Bowes asked that Robynson bring the company record book with him when he came. This was an unusual request. The record book was usually held in the company hall, in the ‘paper office’ of the clerk, and was not supposed to be moved or transported anywhere.¹¹ In fact, some company clerks were made to swear an oath that they would never remove the record books from their company halls.¹² But because he had just recently been appointed clerk and given possession of the records, Robynson was in a position to secretly remove the Goldsmiths’ court book and take it with him to Bowes’ house on Lombard Street.

Robynson recalled that, when he arrived at Lombard Street, he found Bowes and Stanley sitting together in Bowes’ counting house. (The two men were close friends: Stanley had been Bowes’s apprentice back in the 1530s, and was related to him by marriage.) Bowes asked Robynson to open the record book and ‘to read vnto hym and to the said Thomas Stanley all that was enterde in to the said Booke done and passed’ at the company meeting on 21 October. Then, according to Robynson:

when this deponent had red vnto them accordynglie saying that there was all “why” said Sir Martyn Bowes “is my Brother Stanleys graunte lefte owt”, And [Robynson] answerd that there was no more then wrytten in the said Booke as in very deade there was no word of any soche graunte then enterd in the said Booke ... wherevpon the said Sir Martyn caused [Robynson] to take pen and Inke and to wryghte word for word as the saide Sir Martyn comanded hym to doe, where vpon the said supposed graunt was entred into the said Booke.

Bowes dictated a statement for Robynson to write into the book, granting Stanley and his wife the lease of the house on Maiden Lane for the term of thirty years. Robynson did as he was asked. He then read the lease back to Bowes, who made a small correction, asking for a

¹¹ In the later sixteenth century, the Goldsmiths’ Company decreed that only those papers and books in current use should be kept in the clerk’s paper office, with other documents moved to the company treasury for safer keeping. GCCM, Book N, p. 180.

¹² Arthur Henry Johnson, *The history of the Worshipful Company of Drapers of London: preceded by an introduction on London and her gilds up to the close of the XVth century* (5 vols., Oxford, 1914-22), vol. 2, p. 327. For increasing security measures more generally, see Paul Griffiths, ‘Secrecy and authority in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century London’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1997).

phrase to be inserted in the middle of the passage. After Robynson had made the change and read the text back out loud, Bowes approved the wording, and Robynson took his leave. He returned immediately to the Goldsmiths' Hall and put the book back in its place. The lease that he inserted that evening was not questioned until 1573, when it became the subject of a dispute between Stanley's widow and the Goldsmiths' Company wardens. By this time, both Bowes and Stanley were dead, and Robynson was the only surviving witness to the record's creation.

It might initially seem odd that the Goldsmiths' Company wardens would be willing to bring this case to a court of law, because by so doing they were essentially questioning the validity of *their own archives*. This is counter-intuitive, since the company archives were created precisely in order to be an authoritative and reliable resource of fact and precedent. By bringing this dispute to a law court outside the bounds of the company hall, the Goldsmiths ran the risk of tarnishing the reputation of their archives, and drawing the company into public scandal. But it is equally possible that, by bringing this false record to light, the Goldsmiths' Company could in fact strengthen its own reputation as the protector of the integrity of its records. By exposing this single case of fraud (as they presented and explained it), the company governors were able to show that they valued truth and integrity in their archives, and they made an open show of demonstrating that they would root out any instances of corruption or manipulation as and when they were discovered. The company's argument was in this sense very carefully constructed: the wardens who acted as witnesses all claimed to be innocent of the original misdeed, and the full responsibility was placed on Robynson who, they explained, had acted contrary to the company's established orders and customs.¹³

It is also important to remember that this court case was *not* aimed at prosecuting or punishing Robynson for his act of falsification. In fact, Robynson was a witness on the company's behalf, acting in full accordance with the wardens' wishes. The whole point of the court case was that the Goldsmiths' Company *wanted* this particular lease to be found false in court; they wanted to evict Stanley's widow from the house on Maiden Lane, and Robynson's testimony was the best way to do this. Robynson told a story that confirmed the

¹³ The company did soon introduce new measures to ensure that a similar situation would not occur in future. In 1578, it ruled that 'the Clarke hereafter shall rede at the nexte syttinge of the courte all suche orders and matters as were passed and agreed' at the previous meeting. The wardens could then approve the minutes on a regular basis. GCCM, Book L, part 2, p. 412. Other companies had similar policies; for a comparable example see London, Drapers' Hall, MB 8, fo. 90.

invalidity of the lease, and in so doing he helped the Goldsmiths' Company to achieve its primary goal of reclaiming their property. His testimony avoided placing any serious blame on himself – he claimed to have inserted the lease at the request of Sir Martin Bowes, his superior in the company, whose commands he could not reasonably refuse – and in so doing he also neatly avoided implicating any other member of the company's government (Bowes and Stanley, both dead, could neither confirm nor contradict his version of events). By telling such a believable and coherent story, and one that fitted exactly with the textual evidence available in the archives, Robynson helped the Goldsmiths' Company to regain control over the house on Maiden Lane without harming the reputation of the company and the veracity of its record-keeping too seriously.

This alerts us to the fact that company clerks were able to shape and control the narrative that was told through their archives, and that they could alter that narrative to suit changing circumstances and requirements. Robynson's deposition carried so much weight in court precisely because he was the person most familiar with the company records, and so could act as their interpreter and translator for outsiders. As Andrew Butcher has noted, 'clerks were a crucial repository of collective knowledge or memory and their writings were an embodiment of that particular and general knowledge within the community'.¹⁴ In this situation, Robynson was not simply a neutral repository of memory and information; he actively shaped, ordered, and imposed a narrative on the past, changing the interpretation of archival documents in order to suit his current situation. It was this combination of the person and memory of the clerk, and the textual evidence of the document, that allowed the full story (or at least the story that was most desirable at the time) to be revealed and believed in court.

This court case also shows that the Goldsmiths' Company records were not always an accurate account of events, and they do not necessarily tell us what happened in official company meetings. The records could be falsified, tweaked, inserted, or changed after the fact, depending on who had access to them, and who was in charge of their production and safekeeping. It is notable, however, that these kinds of manipulations and indiscretions, even scandals, rarely show up in the company records themselves. Just by looking at the Goldsmiths' Company's own archives, there is no evidence that Robynson's copy of the lease to Stanley was controversial in any way. The company minutes make no mention of the court case in 1573, and no one went back through the records to cross out or amend the original entry of 1557. As far as the company records are concerned, the narrative remained smooth

¹⁴ Butcher, 'The functions of script', p. 167.

and unbroken. The only way to discover what actually happened is to extend the search elsewhere, in this case shifting our attention to the records of the Court of Requests. The silence about this court case in the Goldsmiths' Company's own archives shows that the company was able to manipulate its own history through editing and censoring the content of its archives. It is only through consulting other sources, and tracing the lives and careers of the people involved in the records' creation, that we can start to see something of the bigger picture.

Part of the reason that these kinds of falsifications are so difficult to trace in institutional records is that company clerks had almost complete control over their archives. This meant not only that they had direct access to all the company's information, but also that they could cover their tracks, imposing a uniformity on the records that concealed any intervention or wrongdoing. Some clerks used this power to manipulate institutional records for their own personal gain. Richard Reade, who succeeded to the clerkship of the Goldsmiths' Company after Robynson's death in 1577, was accused of dealing very 'vndulie with the howse' during his time in office. The company wardens claimed that he 'had gotten and reaped sinisterlie to his owne vse diuerse somes of money without anie sounde or pregnant reasons by him made for the same', and concluded that 'yt seemed that he vsed his owne sway and discrecon without the companies order and direcon'.¹⁵ Compared to these accusations of embezzlement, Robynson's insertion of a false lease seems to have been differently motivated. He had not created a lease for himself, but for someone else – and during his twenty years as company clerk, no other complaints were levied against him. This suggests that archival manipulations were often the result not only of personal ambition or self-interest, but could equally be carried out as a result of pressing social ties and obligations. We therefore need to look not only at the clerk, but also at his network of friends and colleagues, and his obedience to his superiors and patrons in the company hierarchy.

II

NETWORKS AND PATRONAGE

Institutional record-keeping was a highly politicised activity. Clerks were caught up in complex networks of patronage and obligation, and they often owed their advancement to powerful figures in corporate and civic government. These relationships had a significant

¹⁵ GCCM, Book N, p. 179.

influence on clerky practice. In Robynson's case, he falsified the Goldsmiths' Company records at the direct request of Sir Martin Bowes. In order to understand why Robynson did this, and what the wider implications are, it is worth looking at the relationship between these men in greater detail. In so doing, we can see a web of connections that spread outwards from the Goldsmiths' Company to include a wider circle of writers and their patrons, thus expanding the focus from this one record to a wider milieu of political and cultural activity in mid-sixteenth-century London.

In order to understand why Robynson ended up in this position, it is first useful to know something about his background. He was born in 1520 in Lincolnshire, where he attended grammar school as a classmate of William Cecil.¹⁶ He entered Corpus Christi College, Oxford, as an exhibitioner in 1536, graduating BA in 1540 and MA in 1544.¹⁷ After completing his degree he moved to London, where he joined the Goldsmiths' Company as an apprentice to Bowes, at that time one of the company's most prominent and influential members. It is not known how the connection between the two men was first made – Robynson had at least one brother living in London at the time of his arrival in the city, and it is possible that he brokered the arrangement; or Robynson could have contacted his old schoolmate William Cecil for help finding a position.¹⁸ In any case, once he began his apprenticeship Robynson does not appear to have embarked on any training in the goldsmiths' craft, and it seems clear that he never intended to pursue a career as a practicing goldsmith. Instead, he spent his apprenticeship working as a clerk in the Royal Mint, where Bowes was Under-Treasurer. It is most likely that Robynson was hoping to find work in London as a writer or administrator, using the skills that he had acquired at university and applying them in a civic context. Because he was born in Lincolnshire, Robynson would have been classed as a 'foreigner' in London, and he needed to be made free of a livery company before he could claim citizenship. This explains why he would have entered the Goldsmiths' Company: he was not looking to pursue a career as an artisan as such, but company membership would have provided him with a powerful patron, good contacts, and the freedom of London, as well as offering him steady employment for his first years in the city.

¹⁶ For biographies of Robynson see John Bennell, 'Robinson, Ralph (1520–1577)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004); online edition (2006) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23863>]; Jennifer Bishop, 'Ralph Robynson (1520-1577): a 16th-century goldsmith and translator', *Goldsmiths' Review* (2014).

¹⁷ Robynson was one of the first holders of his school exhibition at Corpus Christi. A. M. Cook, 'The King's School, Grantham', *The Lincolnshire Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1935), 104-109.

¹⁸ GCCM, book L, part 2, pp. 230, 251.

Robynson was made free of the Goldsmiths' Company in October 1551, and in this same year he also published the first English translation of Thomas More's *Utopia* – a celebrated version of the text that is still in print even today.¹⁹ His translation was dedicated to his former schoolmate Cecil, then secretary of state to Edward VI. This dedication has been interpreted by historians as a request for patronage, and this is probably true: after his apprenticeship at the Mint had ended, Robynson might have hoped that Cecil would help him find employment in the city. But it is likely that Robynson was also cultivating the Goldsmiths' Company wardens as potential patrons at the same time. In this case, the appearance of his translation of *Utopia* in 1551 might have been aimed at strengthening Robynson's profile in the Goldsmiths' Company, just as much as it might have been a bid for Cecil's personal attention and support. By publicly advertising his relationship with Cecil in the dedication of his book, Robynson was making both his political connections as well his literary aspirations known to the Goldsmiths' Company wardens, possibly with a view to getting a permanent job or promotion in the company hierarchy.

In fact, Robynson came very close to gaining such a position in May 1551. The Goldsmiths' Company clerkship had recently become vacant, and the company wardens were choosing between two candidates: Robynson, and the goldsmith Roger Mundy. In the end, Mundy was offered the position, with Robynson held in reserve: the wardens decided that 'mr Roger Mundy wyll take vpon the clerkeshypp of thys company... yf not Rauf Robynson to haue yt for one yere vpon a lyking'.²⁰ Given that he was in the running for this job, Robynson's publication of *Utopia* may have been in part intended as an advertisement of his skills, literacy, and learning – in effect, part of his bid for promotion and preferment within the Goldsmiths' Company. Just as a craftsmen created a masterwork at the end of his training to showcase his abilities, Robynson produced a book at the end of his apprenticeship to showcase his literary skills, his political connections, and his humanist background. Robynson's translation of *Utopia* was therefore entirely congruous with his bid to win the coveted post of company clerk in 1551.

¹⁹ For Robynson's translation of *Utopia* see Jennifer Bishop, 'Utopia and civic politics in mid-sixteenth-century London', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 54, no. 4 (2011); Terence Cave, 'The English translation: thinking about the commonwealth', in Terence Cave (ed.), *Thomas More's Utopia in early modern Europe: paratexts and contexts* (Manchester; New York, 2008); Joshua Phillips, 'Staking claims to *Utopia*: Thomas More, fiction and intellectual property', in Curtis Perry (ed.), *Material culture and cultural materialisms in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Turnhout, 2001).

²⁰ GCCM, book I, p. 128.

After Robynson missed out on this promotion, it is not known how he was employed for the next few years. He wrote to Cecil around this time asking for financial aid, although there is no record of Cecil's response.²¹ He did certainly carry out some small commissions for the Goldsmiths' Company, and received occasional payments for such tasks as drawing up the wardens' accounts, but he does not seem to have drawn a regular salary.²² It is possible that Robynson was working as an assistant to the company's clerk, Roger Mundy – he could also have continued to work as a clerk for Bowes, taking on the occasional commission from other company wardens on the side. His perseverance paid off, and when the company clerkship next became vacant six years later Robynson was once again nominated, and this time he was successfully elected. On gaining the post he was immediately promoted to the company's livery. It is perhaps no coincidence that a second edition of Robynson's *Utopia* appeared in 1556, just a year before he attained this important office: once again, it would appear that his publication of *Utopia* was timed to appear just when the decision about a new clerk was being made by the company wardens.

Throughout all of this, Bowes was a crucial patron and supporter for Robynson. It was very rare that a clerk would be appointed without close ties to someone in the company hierarchy, and many clerks of the Goldsmiths' Company gained their positions through the recommendations of powerful patrons. Richard Reade, for instance, who became clerk after Robynson, was appointed to office after the company wardens received letters of recommendation from the Earl of Leicester and Sir Christopher Hatton.²³ Reade was succeeded by a lawyer, William Dyos, whose candidacy for the clerkship was supported by a judge, Lord Edmund Anderson.²⁴ Robynson's connection with Cecil may well have helped his application for the company clerkship, but it is clear that in this case his primary debt was to Bowes. In his deposition of 1573, Robynson recalled that 'he had the said office [of clerk] by the meanes and procurement of... Sir Martyn'.²⁵ It is likely that Bowes had been grooming Robynson for the company clerkship from the very start of their relationship, first finding him work as a clerk in the Royal Mint, and then supporting his candidacy for the company post when it became available. As the court case of 1573 makes clear, it would have been entirely to Bowes's advantage to have one of his former servants placed in such a useful

²¹ For Robynson's letters to Cecil, see London, The British Library, Lansdowne Ms. 2, nos. 57-59.

²² For instance GCCM, book I, p. 229.

²³ GCCM, Book L, part 1, p. 286.

²⁴ GCCM, Book N, p. 163.

²⁵ TNA, REQ 2/43/88.

position, with direct access to the company's books and accounts. The relationship between Bowes and Robynson was therefore reciprocal: Bowes provided patronage and support for Robynson, and Robynson in turn was able to perform favours for Bowes at his request.

Robynson's career trajectory in this sense was not unique. Men in Robynson's position often joined a livery company in order to pursue careers as professional writers, administrators, or literary agents. Many booksellers, stationers, and publishers operated from within the ranks of the livery companies: *Utopia*'s publisher, Abraham Veale, was a member of the Drapers' Company but worked as a stationer, and trained several apprentices as stationers before freeing them through the official channels of the Drapers' Company.²⁶ Many clerks and scribes pursued a similar course, furthering their writerly careers under the auspices of livery company membership. One example is Andrew Palmer, a member of the Goldsmiths' Company and comptroller of the Royal Mint, who spent much of his career working as a scribe.²⁷ He bound a number of apprentices to himself as goldsmiths, but trained at least some of these as scribes, and they too went on to work as scribes in practice although nominally they belonged to the Goldsmiths' Company. One of these was Richard Collins, who was freed as a goldsmith, worked as a scribe, and then went on to become clerk of the Stationers' Company. One of Collins' apprentices, Richard Wright, was also freed as a goldsmith but trained as a scribe; and Wright went on to follow the same pattern, training his apprentices as scribes but freeing them as goldsmiths.²⁸

It is likely that Robynson was following a similar path, using his connection with the Goldsmiths' Company as a means to further his career as a professional writer. In Robynson's case, this involved not just administrative work and record-keeping, but also more literary aspirations, as evidenced by his translation of *Utopia*. Again, this combination of interests was not unique. One close parallel is Robynson's fellow Goldsmiths' Company member Thomas Nicholls, who published an English translation of Thucydides' *History of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians* in 1550, the year before Robynson's *Utopia* first appeared in print.²⁹ Like Robynson, Nicholls had also received a university education (in his case at Trinity Hall, Cambridge) before moving to London and joining the

²⁶ Gerald D. Johnson, 'The Stationers versus the Drapers: control of the press in the late sixteenth century', *The Library*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1988).

²⁷ Peter Blayney, *The Stationers' Company and the printers of London, 1501-1557* (2 vols., Cambridge, 2013), vol. 1, p. 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁹ *The history writtoute by Thucidides the Athenyan of the warre... translated oute of Frenche into the English language by Thomas Nicolls citezeine and goldesmyth of London* (1550).

Goldsmiths' Company.³⁰ He was made free of the company by patrimony in 1548 and, like Robynson, he advertised his company affiliation on the title page of his published book, describing himself as a 'citezeine and goldesmyth of London'.³¹ Nicholls' translation of Thucydides was dedicated to John Cheke, one of his former tutors at Cambridge. Again, there is a parallel with Robynson, whose translation of *Utopia* was dedicated to Cecil, a close friend and brother-in-law to Cheke, and one of his former university pupils. This suggests that both Robynson and Nicholls were connected with, or were seeking patronage from, the same circle of humanist statesmen in government during Edward VI's reign.

Although the similarities between their careers are striking, it is not clear whether Nicholls and Robynson had any direct connection with each other. They were both members of the Goldsmiths' Company livery (Nicholls was elected to the livery in 1555, two years before Robynson), and Nicholls served several times as a warden while Robynson was acting as clerk, so they would certainly have been known to each other. There is one interesting connection between the two: after the death of his first wife, Nicholls married the daughter of Richard Reade, Robynson's successor as company clerk, who himself had married Robynson's widow Margaret, and acted as a stepfather to Robynson's youngest son, also called Ralph.³² This suggests that there may have been a small network of writers within the Goldsmiths' Company, linked together through ties of marriage, patronage, and friendship. As professional writers, company clerks were well placed to be at the centre of such groups; they maintained ties with both the corporate and literary worlds, and were able to move fairly easily between these different roles.

A broader perspective on Robynson's career, taking in the details of his relationship with Bowes and his aspirations as a writer, helps to explain why he may have felt obliged to falsify the Goldsmiths' Company records in October 1557. We can see that this was a key turning point in Robynson's career, and perhaps a test of his loyalty – if he had refused to enter the lease at Bowes' request, he would have lost his main source of support in the company, and may have risked losing his promotion and any chance of future advancement. By looking at Robynson's wider network and activities in the 1550s, we can also see that his career in record-keeping and his involvement in literary production were very closely linked. This draws our attention to the fact that company clerks were not simply administrators, but

³⁰ R. C. D. Baldwin, 'Nicholls, Thomas (*b.* in or before 1523, *d.* 1612)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004); online edition (2008). [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20123>].

³¹ GCCM, book I, p. 30.

³² Reade refers to Nicholls as his son-in-law in his will: TNA, PROB 11/94/171.

were often writers in a broader sense, cultivating relationships with patrons, publishers, and printers, and using their connections in the literary world to further their careers in the city. The final section of this article examines this crossover in greater detail, showing that institutional archives contained considerably more ‘creative’ writing than has previously been recognised.

III

CLERKS AS WRITERS

Clerks, scribes, and scribes working in administrative positions often had literary connections. Linne R. Mooney and Estelle Stubbs have identified several clerks working at the London Guildhall in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries who were also literary scribes, matching their handwriting with manuscripts by Chaucer, Gower, and Langland, among others. Similar connections have been found for medieval writers including Robert Bale (scrivener, city chronicler, and clerk of the Mercers’ Company), and Thomas Usk (the earliest known reader of and responder to Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, author of *The testament of love*, and clerk of the Goldsmiths’ Company).³³ As Marion Turner suggests, through the study of such figures, historians are growing ‘increasingly aware of the value of considering generically diverse ... texts as part of the same cultural environment’.³⁴ By blurring the boundaries between documentary record-keeping and literary production, medieval historians have shown that company clerks were professional writers in the broadest sense, producing a wide range of texts that crossed generic boundaries.

Robynson’s most obvious literary output was his translation of *Utopia*, but it is also possible to see elements of his creative writing in the Goldsmiths’ Company archives. On a basic level the clerk was always responsible for the language and the level of description included in his texts; in this sense, record-keeping was *always* a creative process, involving the construction of narrative and story-telling, more than simply the straightforward compilation of fact. But we also need to recognise that very different kinds of records went into the company archives, and that they contain a variety of material that resists easy

³³ Mooney and Stubbs, *Scribes and the city*; Mooney, ‘Locating scribal activity’; Marion Turner, ‘Thomas Usk and John Ardene’, *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 47, no. 1 (2012); Paul Strohm, ‘Politics and poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380s’, in Lee Patterson (ed.), *Literary practice and social change in Britain, 1380-1530* (Berkeley, 1990); Anne F. Sutton, *The mercery of London: trade, goods and people, 1130-1578* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 179.

³⁴ Turner, ‘Thomas Usk’, p. 102.

classification. In addition to recording the everyday minutiae of company business, drawing up leases, contracts, and financial accounts, Robynson also appears to have acted as a narrator of corporate life both within and outside the Goldsmiths' Hall. His surviving writings include detailed descriptions of civic events and ceremonies, and these read more like chronicle entries than court minutes. The inclusion of some narrative set-pieces in the Goldsmiths' Company archives complicates our reading of these institutional records as a purely documentary resource. By examining these more 'creative' texts alongside the company's everyday business records, we can see that early modern archives contained various different types of writing in close juxtaposition, covering every aspect of corporate life in early modern London.

Some of Robynson's descriptions of civic events appear to have been created separately from the company's official records books, and only inserted into them at a later date. In one such text, dated July 1559, Robynson wrote a lengthy account of a military display that was put on by the London citizens to entertain Queen Elizabeth at Greenwich. He narrated the full course of this event, which took place over two days, dwelling particularly on the appearance and costumes of the goldsmiths who participated in the display for the Queen. He noted that the young goldsmiths of the company had all dressed up in military attire and 'contended emonge themselves eche to passe other in riche and gorgious araye'. He observed that 'most of them sett furthe themselves with cheanes of gold, aglettes of gold and suche lyke. Dyuers also procured for their owne wearynge corselettes fynely gilte and connyngly grauen, [and] many of them dyd weare in their morians verie faire and costlye plumes'. He then made a detailed account of their weapons and accessories, before describing their procession to Greenwich and their performance before the Queen where, he said, they engaged in 'skyrmyshynge verie warlyke not without muche pleasure and declaracion', before returning home to London.³⁵

This document does not conform to the style, format, and content of the company's regular court minutes. It is written on a separate sheet of paper, and may not have originally been intended for inclusion in the record book. It is possible that Robynson was commissioned to produce the text by the company wardens, as an official commemoration of the company's participation in the military display; this would explain why Robynson gave so much attention to the weapons, accessories, and appearance of the goldsmiths, listing how many pikemen, billmen, and wiffers the company provided, and noting that 'so wyllynge

³⁵ GCCM Book K, part 2, p. 470.

were our men to sett forward themselves... that the number of vs appoynted was fully performed with an ouerplus'.³⁶ However, the level of detail here exceeds what would usually be required for the company's records. In its form and content, the text resembles a journal entry or chronicle set-piece more than an institutional record. There is a close parallel with the 'diary' or chronicle created by Robynson's contemporary Henry Machyn, a parish clerk and member of the Merchant Tailors' Company, who produced a very similar description of this same event.³⁷ The main difference between the two versions is that whereas Machyn described the overall spectacle, noting the presence of 'all the craftes of London' equally, Robynson focused specifically on the preparations and participation of his colleagues in the Goldsmiths' Company.³⁸ Robynson's description of this event is thus written almost entirely from the perspective of the Goldsmiths, as suited his role as company clerk.

Robynson's descriptive account of the military display blurs the lines between documentary record-keeping and a more creative writing process, highlighting the fact that predominantly 'factual' company archives did contain a significant amount of 'literary' material. It was clerks like Robynson who were able to combine record-keeping with other forms of writing such as chronicling and story-telling, and to weave these together in the company archives. This is again reflected in a second text in the Goldsmiths' Company records, written in Robynson's hand and dated April 1567. This second piece describes a ceremony during which a member of the Goldsmiths' Company was made Sheriff of London. Once again, Robynson provided a detailed account of the day's events, paying particular attention to the costumes and appearance of the goldsmiths and other citizens who participated. He carefully reconstructed each stage of the ritual, starting with the procession to the Guildhall for the swearing-in ceremony, followed by the barge journey up the River Thames to the Exchequer. He described how the members of the procession 'tooke their waye ... to the watersyde at the iij cranes in the vintrie, the goldsmythes leadynge the waye ... where iij barges were ready to receaue them all'. They disembarked at the Exchequer, where the new Sheriff was welcomed, before processing back to the city for dinner at the

³⁶ GCCM Book K, part 2, p. 470.

³⁷ For Machyn see Ian Mortimer, 'Tudor chronicler or sixteenth-century diarist? Henry Machyn and the nature of his manuscript', *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, vol. 33, no. 4 (2002); Andrew Gordon, *Writing early modern London: memory, text and community* (London, 2013), pp. 11-59.

³⁸ *The diary of Henry Machyn: citizen and Merchant-Taylor of London (1550-1563)*, ed. John Gough Nichols (London, 1848), pp. 202-203. Another description of the same event appears in John Strype, *Annals of the reformation and establishment of religion, and other various occurrences in the church of England, during Queen Elizabeth's happy reign: together with an appendix of original papers of state, records and letters* (4 vols., Oxford, 1824), vol. 1, part 1, pp. 287-288.

Sheriff's house. When the participants had all 'worshipfully dyed', they each departed for home, 'euery man at his pleasure'.³⁹

Like the account of the military display, this description of the Sheriff's inauguration ceremony was written from first-hand observation. Unlike the military event, however, we are explicitly told that Robynson took part in this particular ceremony himself. He describes where he stood in the procession, and notes his place along with sixteen of the Goldsmiths' Company's board of assistants and the company beadle. This serves as a reminder that company clerks were not only the observers and chroniclers of corporate life, but that they were also principal actors in many of the events that they narrated. Clerks thus translated their own experiences into written records, and their presence at the original event would have served to lend an extra level of authority to their texts. This takes us back to a consideration of the court case of 1573, in which Robynson was called on to describe what had happened back in October 1557. On this occasion, Robynson was a key witness because he had been present at the meeting with Bowes, and he could use his memory and recollection as a witness to explain the circumstances leading up to and including the creation of the lease. Clerks were seen to be reliable sources of information precisely because they most often observed or participated in company events first-hand, and were privy to all discussions and actions, before they sat down to create the official written record. It was this combination of participation, followed by later recollection and the creation of textual evidence, that allowed clerks to shape and intertwine the various narrative strands of company history

Clerks were therefore closely identified with the documents that they produced, and they shaped the content of institutional archives in various ways. Their excursions into, and manipulation of the records could be fairly obvious and innocent, as with the descriptions of pageants and spectacles that the clerk observed and participated in; or it could be more subtle and subversive, as clerks shaped or tweaked records, altering facts to suit the demands of their patrons or to advance their own careers. Although the latter form of intervention in the records may be difficult to identify and leaves few textual traces, it nonetheless forms part of a broad spectrum of record-keeping practices that ranged from objective, neutral accounting to deliberate falsification. We need therefore to read institutional records as a blend of fact and fiction, a combination of documentary reporting and creative writing. Robynson's example illustrates the importance of looking beyond the face-value text of institutional records, and uncovering something of the circumstances in which they were produced. This

³⁹ GCCM, book K, part 2, p. 349.

allows us to understand the agenda behind the records' creation, and complicates our reading of them as a straightforward historical source. Also, and as importantly, this approach allows us to draw connections between different kinds of texts – in this case institutional records, literary publications, and court depositions – in order to understand how these different genres interacted with and informed each other. From this approach, archives may be understood not as fixed repositories of fact, but rather as organic collections of multiple and changing stories. By focusing on the people who created and used institutional records, and examining the social relationships, patronage, and ties of obligation that surrounded them, these records can be made to tell a more complex story than that which they might initially appear to present.

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