

**Ready to disport with you: Homosocial culture amongst the wool merchants of
fifteenth-century Calais**

And it would please you for your disport and pleasure upon Thursday next coming to meet with us of the east side of this town, in a place called The Pane, you shall find a pair of marked targets of length between one and the other thirteen tailor yards marked out with a line. There we underwritten shall meet with as many of your order and shoot with you at the same targets for a dinner or a supper, price 12d a man. And we pray you of your goodly answer within twenty-four hours. Written at Calais the seventeenth day of August, *anno Jesu 1478.*

Ready to disport with you:

Wedded men Rob Adlyn, John Ekyngton, Philip Williamson, Simon Grantham, Thomas Sharpe, William Bondman, John Dyars, Richard Wylowly, Rob Besten, Thomas Layne, John Wright, Rob Knight

To our well-beloved good Brother Thomas Wright and all other Bachelors being Freemen of the Staple be this delivered.¹

In late summer 1478, a dozen married merchants challenged their bachelor brothers to an archery match. The surviving invitation, found amongst the papers of the wool merchant Cely family, provides rare evidence for mercantile socialising outside of formal feasts, and is particularly notable for its use of a sporting event as a corporate activity. As Raewyn Connell argues in her seminal book *Masculinities*, the ‘institutional

organization of sport embeds definite social relations: competition and hierarchy among men, exclusion or domination of women.... The performance is symbolic and kinetic, social and bodily, at one and the same time'. Synthesising and expanding on the work of other prominent sociologists, she claims that organised sports play a key role in male identity formation – not just in allowing men to demonstrate individual physical prowess, but more significantly in establishing collective masculine experiences that form a keystone of hegemonic male culture.²

Although the function of sports in reifying gender norms into lived practices has been studied now for several decades, this research has tended to focus on professional athletes or ‘serious’ amateurs. Less systematically studied has been the role of casual sports-playing in homosocial enculturation, particularly in a premodern context. Partly this is undoubtedly because without the records created by official teams, leagues and competitions, casual sports – from the friendly kickabout to the pub darts match – easily disappear from view. In terms of my own field of medieval history, while chivalric field sports such as jousting and civic competitions in archery have been analysed for their role in male identity formation, and despite increasing research interest in recreational activities, there is very little published on the role of recreational sports in establishing communal and individual identities.³

In this article, I analyse the ways in which the August 1478 archery match – a friendly competition between amateurs – reiterated masculine social norms and strengthened corporate bonds within a fraternity setting. Set in the wider context of the Calais wool merchant community, it provides the perfect example of homosocial

enculturation: a culture that crossed age and marital categories in order to strengthen hegemonic power.

The socio-economic context

The wool merchants living in fifteenth-century Calais were largely all English men, a group of expats whose properties and extended families generally remained on the other side of the Channel. The specific political and economic context that resulted in their extended presence in Calais requires some explanation, particularly since the privileges and restrictions that resulted from these generated a very specific social milieu.

Medieval English merchants operated under the system of the Staple. The government required that all overseas trade in certain goods be transacted at specific designated market towns or ports, referred to as the 'staple ports'. At these specified places, merchants were required to submit their goods to inspection, and to pay a levy to the Crown on goods for export to the Continent. The wool Staple moved from Bruges to Calais in 1362, to help pay for the high costs of defending the town from the French, as the English had taken it back in 1347.⁴ In the past, staplers' stocks of wool had been seized to pay for the costs of the garrison, or to serve as a 'loan' by York or Lancaster during the Wars of the Roses. By 1466, however, Edward IV and the staplers had come to a formal agreement. The Merchants of the Company of the Staple at Calais were now responsible for paying the wages of the garrison and maintaining the defences of Calais out of the customs and subsidy taxes levied on its members in exchange for a number

of concessions.⁵ There is evidence that other merchants began to avoid the Calais Staple's regulations, both through legitimate means (the Merchant Adventurers had their licences renewed to export wool outside the Staple) and illegitimate methods (smuggling rose as wool bypassed the Staple on its way to the Burgundian marketplaces). High export taxes and tight regulations made fewer and fewer merchants of prestigious companies such as the Grocers interested in joining the Company, especially since the growing English cloth trade pushed down the demand in Europe for English wool.⁶ By the mid-1470s the Calais fellowship was mostly composed of men of reasonably modest means, such as the Cely brothers whose interest in the wool trade generated them each an income of around £100 a year. So by the time Rob Acton issued his archery invitation in 1478, the average merchant of the Staple made a decent income but could not be termed rich, and often carried substantial debt: indeed, in 1476 the Norfolk gentleman John Paston warned his son not to lend money to the staplers, who were known as 'slack payers'.⁷

It can be difficult to ascertain the precise membership of the fellowship, as most wool merchants were also members of craft guilds and would be designated in official documents by their company affiliation, not their membership of the Staple. However, Alison Hanham has found records of at least 220 active staplers during the period 1474-89, though their involvement in the industry varied from shipping a few dozen sack-weights of wool every year as a useful financial sideline to other mercantile interests, to a handful of men who shipped over two hundred sack-weights each. Most staplers fell toward the lower end of the scale.⁸

Calais at this time was a town of perhaps four thousand inhabitants. The Staple was fiercely protective of its privileges in the town, and indeed in 1484 insisted its members could not both belong to the company and be aldermen of the town, as in their civic roles they would ‘observe that in many things contrary to the wealth of the Place’.⁹ While the fellowship as a whole was represented in London by the mayor of the Company, it was at the ‘Place’ that ordinances were passed and disputes heard, in the Company’s own court of law.¹⁰ In organisational terms, the Company formed a close-knit, monopolistic cartel, jealous of its privileges, anxious about encroachment from both Crown and town.

Yet although the Staplers might have been insular in terms of their professional outlook, they were not an isolated community. Wool merchants traded in futures as well as on credit; this made them particularly vulnerable to shortages of bullion, which was an ongoing problem from the mid-fourteenth century onward.¹¹ To be financially successful despite the restrictions and taxes in place, merchants had to work hard to maintain a continuous flow of trade. Given their dependence on credit, commercial relationships required mutual confidence, and the Calais wool merchants worked hard to maintain relationships with their business partners back in England and on the Continent. These relationships necessarily blurred the line between the social and economic; the reality of medieval business practices meant that personal trust needed to be placed in one’s trading partners, even when one had legal protections in place.¹² Fortunately, Calais’ geographical location made it a good base from which to maintain business and social connections. Both the Paston and Cely correspondence make it clear

that the journey to Calais from London was not considered particularly onerous or time-consuming, and post travelled so quickly between the two that correspondence between family and friends was easily maintained.¹³ John Paston II escorted Lord Souche and two young heiresses to the town in 1473, noting that Calais was a merry town with plenty to keep them entertained, while just outside the town the Pale's marshes provided space for hawking and riding that the Celys and their acquaintances so enjoyed.¹⁴ The wool trade may have increasingly been a challenging industry in which to make a living, but for the merchants of the Staple, life in Calais could be both agreeable and profitable, serving as it did as an entry-point into the economic life of the Continent.

By the late 1470s, the Staple at Calais was populated by an economically conservative, middlingly wealthy elite that was vulnerable to economic crises and as a result was protectionist in outlook. Many of these men would have acquired the freedom of the Staple through their fathers; if a man had been born once his father was a member of the company, his own admission would cost only 40d. However, in a period when the survival of male heirs could not be taken for granted, there was also always a steady flow of newcomers into the trade.¹⁵ An increasing number came up through apprenticeships, and some were established merchants and officials who paid a high fee to join the company.¹⁶ Many of them would have split their time between London, Calais, European market places and in some cases, their country estates in England. They were, in short, from the growing middle class of the fifteenth century: an ambitious and mobile section of the population that, however, felt itself burdened by the demands of

the Crown and whose prosperity was constantly threatened by price fluctuations and coin shortages in mainland Europe.¹⁷

Establishing community

Earlier work on community within craft guilds in the later middle ages has emphasised the importance of establishing cultural homogeneity within the ranks of the brotherhood. As Margaret Pappano argues, guild activities and legislation were specifically designed to promote fraternity, fining members for quarrelling and for refusing guild duties such as participation in offices and feasts. They worked hard to maintain a corporate, collective identity.¹⁸ Christina Fitzgerald convincingly demonstrates that guild regulations and activities strengthened individuals' identities as members of a corporate whole, and disciplined them into becoming compliant constituent parts of that body.¹⁹ Gervase Rosser's work on religious guilds – whose membership often overlapped with craft guilds, though they served different functions – shows that fraternity feasts not only celebrated the prosperity of a community but also promoted it by facilitating group bonding, which was aided by making attendance compulsory.²⁰

Establishing a collective identity and culture may have been particularly important for the fellowship at Calais. While merchants of all kinds by nature of their profession often had peripatetic lifestyles, the members of the Staple operated in a way that may have particularly relied on social bonds. The Cely family serves as a good example of how the business of the wool trade functioned. One member of a

partnership in the wool trade – here Richard Cely senior or sometimes his son Richard junior – would be responsible for visiting their middleman in wool country to examine the samples, agree to a sale and have the wool transported to London. He would oversee the loading of the wool at the port for transport to Calais. Another member of the partnership (in this case, George Cely, Richard senior’s youngest son) would receive the wool at the Calais end. This partner would usually be responsible for arranging the practicalities of selling the wool onward from Calais. George seems to have lived semi-permanently in Calais, with his elder brother Richard only crossing over occasionally, and his father not at all. It was more typical for junior members of the partnership to take on the Calais side of the business, but the wool merchants inhabiting Calais were certainly not all young bachelors. It seems that the married staplers, however, did not usually bring their families to Calais, and often lived as lodgers of local families if they did not own their own properties there.²¹ The community provided by the fellowship of the Staple may have been particularly valuable to these men living at a distance from their families in England, especially since the regulations of the fellowship discouraged deeper integration into local Calais life. In order for the socio-economic society of the Staple to function, the bonds between its members needed to be more than superficial ties provided simply by membership of the same profession.

The Cely correspondence that provides the primary source of evidence for these bonds is an incomplete collection of documents covering the period 1472-88. In 1489 a dispute arose between Richard Cely junior and the widow of his brother George Cely, and when the case was brought before the Court of Chancery a mass of letters and

memoranda was collected as evidence. The collection forms an incredibly rich source of data about both the wool industry and the Celys, who seem to be quite a typical stapler family in terms of their income and operational structure. By 1478, George Cely was running the Calais end of the business and spent much of the year living there, while his elder brother Richard seems to have spent most of his time in London, with occasional visits to Calais when business demanded it. Despite living for much of the time in separate countries, the brothers clearly had a close relationship and also shared many friends and acquaintances. In the late 1470s, the brothers were single men probably in their early twenties, though both were married by 1484.²² Their father died in 1482, and from that time onward they seem to have run the business as partners, with George moving back to London and leaving their junior relation William Cely in charge at Calais.²³ From this point forward, most of the letter collection is composed of letters from William to George. Prior to this, however, the bulk of the correspondence is between Richard junior and George, and their fraternal bond, friendship and shared economic interests mean that their letters reveal insights into a close-knit mercantile community. The collection also contains a number of letters from colleagues in the wool trade that provide evidence not only of everyday business but also of the social possibilities offered by life in Calais and as a member of the Company.

The letters make it clear that the stapler community relied on informal networks of communication and mutual favours to enact business and to take care of personal matters. The two often bled together. George Cely went very frequently to the great markets in Antwerp and Bergen-op-Zoom. They were long, laborious journeys, and so

were unlikely to be made unless one had a business need to go – but those who were going found themselves inundated with requests for purchases from their fellow staplers. In September 1480, the stapler Edmund Bedingfeld wrote asking his ‘right special friend’ George to buy him a:

long gown of camlet, damask or satin, that be not but a small price of four nobles or there about. I pray you buy me one, but I had rather have camlet, if it be black, tawny or violet, but no other colour.

This rather particular request was followed by a list including ladies’ gloves, archery equipment and daggers! The use of the term ‘friend’ in a medieval letter in itself does not necessarily indicate a particularly close relationship, but certainly there must have been a measure of trust between the two men for Bedingfeld to make such a request and to expect that his goods would be delivered ‘to Lynne or to Bolton with my gear that Bondman sends.’²⁴

This person, William Bondman, appears a number of times in the Cely correspondence. In this instance, evidently he also had goods to send to Bedingfeld that could be shipped across with George’s purchases. This probably was not a very onerous task, as King’s Lynn was England’s third most important port and Cely and Bondman would have plenty of experience shipping goods there. Nonetheless, the request relies on George’s good will toward Bedingfeld and on his acquaintance with Bondman, while the casual way Bedingfield references ‘his gear’ suggests that Cely already knew what other task Bondman was performing for him.

The Celys and William Bondman seem to have been on friendly terms for a number of years. In a letter of August 1478, Richard Cely junior wrote from Calais to George who was away on business in Bruges:

I have been to seek your black gown at Redhood's, and it was at Bondman's, and I have received it and put it in your chest...²⁵

That George was not sure where he left his gown may suggest regular visiting of friends' and colleagues' houses. George evidently trusted Bondman, because in memoranda of 1480 written for a friend who will be receiving wool on his behalf, he noted that either John Elderbeck or William Bondman would have the key to the woolhouse. This is no doubt partly a practical arrangement, as the woolhouse was next door to William's. However, a note that extra fells belonging to the Celys' friend William Maryon were stored alongside Bondman's fells suggests a mutually cooperative relationship that went beyond the convenience of neighbourliness.²⁶ William Bondman's assistance here seems characteristic of behaviour amongst merchants of the Staple at Calais. Taking delivery of goods and other time-sensitive tasks could be disrupted if one needed to be away on business, which for staplers frequently involved trans-continental or trans-Channel travel. Whilst no doubt these merchants made use of their servants in ensuring tasks were carried out, they also called on their friends and colleagues, safe in the knowledge they could expect to repay the favour at a later date.

But as we saw with Edmund Bedingfield, these ties of neighbourly obligation could translate into assistance not directly related to the work of the mart. William

Bondman once again crops up in a letter of May 1482 from William Cely to George, who was in Bruges. Bondman, though at the time in Calais, apparently had a horse stabled at the Starre Inn in Bruges, and William Cely let George know that Bondman was willing to loan George his horse to come home on if he had need of it. The Celys had already dispatched the horse belonging to their friend Thomas Hayward, but ‘he [the horse] is but little: and if it be not big enough you may have William Bondman’s horse.’ This solicitous behaviour was in response to George’s ill-health. As William Cely wrote at the closing of his letter:

I beseech Almighty Jesus keep you and bring you well to Calais, for here are many of your good friends that be sorry for your great sickness.²⁷

It seems unlikely to me in this context that William was using ‘friend’ in the commonplace medieval way of acknowledging an acquaintance of similar or lesser standing. Instead he was talking about *good* friends – the kind of friends who would send a horse all the way to Bruges to help a sick young man get home.

George may have caused his friends particular concern with regards to his health. In a letter of early 1478 George wrote a letter to his father saying his return to Calais was welcomed by friends who had feared him dead, though it is unclear whether he means this was because of illness or perhaps an accident en route:

I came into Calais the Thursday after my departing from you, in safety I thank God, and I was welcome unto my friends, for until my brother came to Calais there was no other tidings there but I was dead.²⁸

It seems likely based on the people who otherwise populate the letters that these ‘friends’ were George’s fellow staplers. George was seriously ill in late 1479, and amongst anxious missives from his family there are also several letters from his fellow staplers that send him good wishes for his recovery.²⁹ At the start of November Ralph Lemynton hoped to ‘hear of your good welfare, the which I beseche almighty God increase to his pleasure’, while at the end of the month Thomas Kesten said that he ‘understood that you have been sore sick and are now well revived, in the which Jesus comfort you and make you strong for his mercy’.³⁰

Despite these several periods of poor health, George Cely seems to have built strong ties with many members of the Company. His relationship with fellow stapler John Dalton is a rare and excellent example of a genuine friendship between two young medieval men. In February 1479, Dalton wrote to Cely with some information about fells he had sold on behalf of Richard Cely senior and some other merchants, before getting to the real meat of the letter:

I pray you that I may be recommended unto your brother Richard Cely, and God knows we greatly miss you. I had rather than the best gown I have that you might abide still here with us. You shall understand more at your coming – it is of mirth the cause I would have you for.

The note finishes with a message from the master lieutenant of the Company – that Cely and William Dalton (John’s brother), in their posts as treasurers, had used up a cask of wine left by the previous treasurer and not replaced it.³¹ This short letter manages to

encapsulate many key business and social elements of Staple life: cooperation rather than competition in the marketplace, including carrying out buying and selling on other staplers' behalf; the everyday duties of the Company, which because of Calais's particular situation resulted in younger merchants often playing central roles in its administration; and genuinely affectionate friendship.

Cely and Dalton were still friends in January 1482, when the latter wrote a quietly sympathetic letter to the former on the loss of his father, while also imparting some sensitive information:

I have received two letters from you, by the which letter I understand of your great heaviness of your father, on whose soul God have mercy. ... Also sir, ... in the reverence of God take it patiently and hurt not yourself, for that which God will have done no man may be against. ... Also sir, where we ate the good puddings, the woman of the house that made them, as I understand she is with child by my brother that had my Irish dagger.

Dalton's condolences here go beyond mere platitudes into a real concern for Cely's welfare. His circuitous message at the end of the letter, meanwhile, was subtly informing Cely that he had fathered a child. Margery, a woman who worked in a Calais pudding house – a venue that sold ale and cheap meals and had associations with prostitution – gave birth to George's child by August 1482.³² Two young men like Cely and Dalton, at some distance from their natal homes and possessed of a decent income, could easily

be imagined to spend their leisure time in all kinds of ‘mirth’: including the sort that got women in trouble.³³

Mixed age socialising and the archery match

In the emergent area of studies in homosociality, the relationship between two or more men of this type – young, unmarried and from an elite background – has been the focus of research. From historians of the middle ages writing about socialising amongst apprentices, to social scientists discussing bonding in fraternities, one of the key assumptions in much analysis of homosocial environments is that we are talking about men of a similar age and marital status.³⁴ Yet for medieval men, many formally-structured homosocial environments – the monastery, orders of chivalry, craft guilds – would necessarily have been made up of men ranging from youths to seniors, and often brought married and unmarried men together. These types of organisations were, of course, ideal environments in which to establish and perpetuate hegemonic norms about gendered behaviour and social power.

Rob Adlyn’s 1478 invitation from the wedded men of the Company to its bachelors to compete in an archery match offers an example of how cross-age socialising could both acknowledge differences between men at different stages of life, whilst reinforcing their solidarity as members of a group. The invitation addresses ‘your order’ of bachelors. This could just mean ‘rank’, but seems more likely to be a playful reference to the group of bachelors being like an order of chivalry. Wedlock was sometimes referred to as an ‘order’, and interestingly ‘bachelor’ was sometimes used as a term for

an aspirant to the knighthood, as in the romance *Arthur and Merlin*: ‘þo was þer made a turnament ... Of bacheler & 3ong kniȝt.’³⁵ In the invitation the reference was obviously facetious, but it did help to create a distinction between the unmarried men and the married men that could suggest some gentle teasing from the men of the ‘order of wedlock’ based on the ‘order of bachelors’ being young and unproved. On the other hand, it also connected both sides: through these fictitious ‘orders’ and through the invitation being from men of the Staple to other men identified as being freemen of the Staple, it emphasised that their differences only goes so far.

These playful ‘orders’ had literary precedents in Arthurian legends that may have been familiar to the staplers. For example, in Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, which brought together multiple versions of largely French romances into a new English telling, King Arthur loses eight of the Round Table’s knights and Sir Pellinore notes that there are ‘in youre courte full noble knyghtes bothe of olde and yonge’.³⁶ His suggestion that half the places are filled with young knights, the other half with mature knights, is accepted without question by Arthur as the sensible approach to producing a balanced Round Table. A court needs young, energetic warriors and older, experienced knights in order to function as a socially and politically powerful unit.

The Round Table, a homosocial elite at the heart of the Arthurian court, seems far removed from a busy Calais mercantile community. But in both settings, the politically or economically determined membership of the group resulted in a homosocial society of elite men, connected to one another firstly by an oath of loyalty to the organisation as a whole, and then by personal ties of friendship. Scott Kiesling

argues that men share a cultural discourse where ‘men are understood normatively to want (and need) to do things with groups of other men’,³⁷ which makes a social event like the Calais archery match seem like it simply naturally happens, even when it has taken planning. There does not seem to be anything exceptional about a group of colleagues playing a game together: except that the mix of men here is different from the type usually discussed in analysis of same sex environments. Rob Adlyn’s challenge from the married men to the bachelors provided an easy division point of the men of the Staple into two distinct categories. But from what we know of mercantile marriage patterns, this categorisation was both temporal and temporary. That is, most men would marry at least once, for the first time usually in their early to mid-twenties.

George Cely and his brother Richard were probably around 25 or 26 when they married, in 1483 and 1484 respectively, having been actively looking for wives for a couple of years. Membership of the Order of Bachelors usually involved graduation to the Order of Wedlock as part of both growing older and becoming more settled in the profession of which all these men were a part.³⁸ The distinction between the bachelors and the married men of the Staple was a friendly one because it was permeable. The married men had all previously been bachelors; almost all of the bachelors would eventually be married men. What this categorisation into teams for a game allowed was the competition that scholars have traditionally seen as a key component of homosocial interaction, while also encouraging the group bonding and reminder of sameness that modern scholarship considers a key component of homosociality.

Research on contemporary homosociality emphasises the key roles of solidarity and communalism in forming meaningful bonds between groups of men. Scott Kiesling argues that the American men he studies use linguistic and social strategies to create ties of solidarity, fidelity and friendship between members of a specific privileged group for their mutual benefit.³⁹ This is particularly effective in informal social situations. As Virginia Fisher and Sue Kinsey note, in contemporary academia informal networking between men with ‘shared masculine interests and values’ provides a significant bar to women, who find it difficult to penetrate the social circle generated by male homosocial bonding.⁴⁰ Patricia Yancey Martin asserts that modern businessmen mobilise ‘affiliating masculinities’ in order to align themselves with other men for reasons of personal or collective gain. Men may perform affiliating masculinities through, for instance, workplace banter – humorous discourse that marks them as sharing similar values. At the same time, these social opportunities also offer places for men to make professional connections that may be denied to women who are not included in these conversations.⁴¹

Of course, the all-male environment of the Staple did not need to exclude women covertly, but the value of affiliating activities in establishing a corporate identity must not be dismissed for this reason. The staplers had to reinforce their collective identity not against the incursion of women, but in the face of a competitive marketplace that was threatening their hold on a business with diminishing financial value. Steven Arxer has argued for the existence of ‘hybrid hegemonic masculinity’ in male-dominated university drinking environments where hypermasculine behaviours

most typically associated with young men, such as getting drunk and hitting on women, are enmeshed with – rather than contrasted to – mutually supportive, emotionally open homosocial bonding.⁴² That is, men can participate in competitive masculine performances that depend upon affective bonds between the participants to ultimately reinforce the cohesion of their social group. This idea of *hybridity* is valuable in study medieval men, because it suggests that mutuality and affection are essential elements of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonies are often understood through the lens of the people they oppress; but of course power structures cannot function if socially dominant groups are not cohesive.

Given the central role of sports in establishing male identity, it is unsurprising that writers in the field of sports science have led many contemporary discussions about homosocial cultures. In the 1990s, the default scholarly assumption was that ‘the dominant form of masculinity in sporting cultures is destructive to the body and denies emotional intimacy’.⁴³ This mirrored work by scholars in the then-nascent field of studies in masculinities, which tended to emphasise the key features of hegemonic masculinity as ‘hypermASCULINE bravado and posturing, ... domination of women and other men through act and language, drinking to excess, [and] sexual conquest.’⁴⁴ More recent work, however, has focused on the shared intimacy and reciprocity that can be offered by even – or perhaps especially by – violent contact sports like boxing. The sheer physical proximity of sparring can easily be understood to result in somatic intimacy, but what kind of intimacy is offered by a non-contact sport like archery?⁴⁵

In many ways, despite its lack of physical aggression, archery is the kind of sport that fits older models of discussion of the value of male sports: it allows an individual to prove their pre-eminence over all men in the competition, and provides a scoring system that allows for a detailed ranking of players to be provided, placing players firmly within a hierarchy of performance. Successive governments in England treated archery not as a sport but as an obligation for all men because of its function in national defence, establishing its central role in proving masculine prowess. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, several laws were passed which prohibited many field sports and other games in an effort to promote archery practice. Laws enforcing archery practice continued well into the Tudor period.⁴⁶ As a competitive sport played by individuals, archery does not seem to even offer the benefits of a team sport with a lower level of physical contact, where somatic intimacy is replaced by a corporate intimacy provided by identification with the team.

In this period, however, archery guilds were a staple feature of many European towns, and these defensive organisations also became sites of devotional activity and community bonding. These guilds often competed against guilds from other towns, allowing competition to become a way of reinforcing their corporate, collective identities.¹ In a similar way, the staplers cleverly turned individual competition into a team event. The players competed not for individual glory, but for their ‘order’, either bachelors or married men, with the aim of winning dinner paid for by the losers. This is a sophisticated level of homosocial interaction: it allowed for competition whilst also

¹ See Laura Crombie’s *Archery and Crossbow Guilds in Medieval Flanders, 1300-1500*, Woodbridge, 2016, especially pp. 159-89.

encouraging team solidarity, and with the prize being a dinner shared between both winners and losers, it subtly underlined the message that ultimately the division between the two teams was less important than the shared social experience of playing a sport and then dining together.

The shared meal was a vital element of this; without it, the division between the bachelors and married men would remain open. The archery match allowed the staplers to playfully acknowledge their differences, but it was the dinner that reminded them of their collective identity. There has been much written on the importance of communal dining in guild experience in the middle ages, with for instance Gervase Rosser noting the ‘ideology of fraternal harmony’ being ‘realized in the proceedings of the communal dinner’.⁴⁷ The formal feasts of both craft and religious guilds was not only a celebration, but also a reinforcement of, corporate values and identity. Eating together made a vow of brotherhood somehow tangible; collective consumption provided collective identity, too.⁴⁸ However, most discussion of this type has focused around formal feasts. The example of the staplers points to group socialising taking place outside that set down in guild ordinances and seems more likely than the annual feast to reflect the everyday reality of corporate socialising, much as in a modern context there is likely to be more opportunity for group bonding in businessmen visiting the golf course together than at the firm Christmas party, despite the latter’s symbolic significance. This informal socialising is both a reflection and a reinforcement of the ties already present between the men of the Company. Were William Bondman and George Cely as good friends in 1478 as they were in 1482, when Bondman offered Cely his horse to get him all the way

home from Bruges? The lack of records prior to 1478 unfortunately mean it is impossible to know. But it does not seem like mere speculation to consider that activities such as the archery match strengthened both their specific friendship, and the ties of community between the men of the Company as a whole.

Conclusion

Sports have typically been seen as a location for a stereotypical hegemonic masculinity based on divisive competition, where the struggle for dominance requires a victor. What happened in Calais in 1478 was more complex, but no less reinforcing of hegemonic social norms: an elite masculine culture, the company of the Staple, was celebrated through a complex blending of competition, collaboration and ultimately reintegration into a corporate whole.

The best way to see this unity may be when the staplers had cause to close ranks. In January 1482, a dispute over the ownership of a woolhouse quickly turned quite literally to shit, as a certain Bottrell broke a window of the Celys' woolhouse and threw dung through it. George Cely's servant Joyce Parmenter paid a man to get rid of the dung, but Botrell assaulted him and took his pitchfork from him. Quick-thinking Parmenter invited four of Cely's fellow staplers to breakfast to witness the damage to Cely's fells 'that they might bear witness another day'.⁴⁹ The Cely household, even in the absence of its master, knew to draw upon the social connections of the stapler community to protect itself. The invitation to breakfast is interesting: perhaps Parmenter thought it would make the men more enthusiastic about coming over in the

early morning to help. In any case, it was another kind of casual meal that drew together the stapler community, this time in service of one of their members. As for what resulted from that meeting: later that year Bottrell was ordered by the Porter of Calais to quit the city. This was a serious punishment unlikely to have been provoked simply by an act of vandalism and assault of a lower-status man. Nonetheless, Bottrell was ousted and William Cely observed that the ownership of the woolhouse should now be secure.⁵⁰ The men of the Staple might compete against one another in friendly games and in business, but they would close ranks to defend one of their own. In this context, casual sports can be seen as an important component of establishing an elite male group identity that could weather economic and political uncertainty and would fight together to defend its privileges from the incursions of town and crown.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- ¹ All Middle English translations are my own. A ‘tailor yard’ is a cloth measurement of thirty-six inches. Alison Hanham (ed.), *The Cely Letters: 1472-1488*, Early English Text Society, O.S. 273, London, 1975, no. 29, pp. 26-7. Hereafter CL.
- ² R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd edn, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 54, and further discussion pp. 30, 35-6, 57, 80-1. See also Michael A. Messner, *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1992; *Masculinities, Gender Relations and Sports*, ed. Jim McKay, Michael A. Messner and Don Sabo, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2000; Timothy Jon Curry, ‘Fraternal Bonding in the Locker Room: A Profeminist Analysis of Talk About Competition and Women’, in *Men’s Lives*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner, Boston, 5th edn., 2001, pp. 188-201.
- ³ There has been a good deal written about games, particularly in the context of youth or gender relations. See for instance: Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children*, New Haven and London, 1996, pp. 176-83, Hollie L.S. Morgan, *Beds and Chambers in Late Medieval England: Readings, Representations and Realities*, Woodbridge, 2017, pp. 116-21, Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History*, Oxford, 1993, pp. 78-80 and 114-18, and *Games and Gaming in Medieval Literature*, ed. Serina Patterson, New York, 2015. Such texts usually cite physical sports as a significant feature of the (particularly youthful) male life cycle, but have limited discussion of their functions within communities. On jousting’s role in establishing masculine identity, see Michael Bennett, ‘Military Masculinity in England and Northern France c. 1050 – 1225’, in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. Dawn M. Hadley, London, 1999, pp. 78-9. On homosocial bonding in tournament sports, see Louisa Olga Fradenburg, *City, Marriage, Tournament: Arts of Rule in Late Medieval Scotland*, Madison, 1991, p. 122, Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, Philadelphia, 2003, pp. 48-9, and Rachel E. Moss, “And much more I am soryat for my good knyghts”: Fainting, Homosociality, and Elite Male Culture in Middle English Romance’, *Historical Reflections* 42:1, 2016, p.106.
- ⁴ Pamela Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community: The Grocers’ Company and the Politics and Trade of London, 1000 – 1485*, New Haven and London, 1995, p. 216.
- ⁵ Alison Hanham, *The Celys and Their World: An English Merchant Family of the Fifteenth Century*, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 224-5; Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile Community*, pp. 527-8.
- ⁶ Jenny Kermode, *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, 168.
- ⁷ *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Norman Davis, Vol. 1, 1971, p. 496.
- ⁸ Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile Community*, pp. 528-9, Hanham, *Celys and Their World*, p. 417, pp. 242-5.
- ⁹ ‘The Place’ was the Staplers’ hall in Calais. William Cely to Richard and George Cely, 29 February 1484, CL no. 209, p. 200. Footnote on medieval middle class.
- ¹⁰ Hanham, *Celys and Their World*, p. 240.

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- ¹¹ Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, p. 198.
- ¹² Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, 201, 227.
- ¹³ Letters could be sent between London and Calais in well under a week. Susan Rose, *Calais: An English Town in France 1347 – 1558*, Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2008, p. 110.
- ¹⁴ Rose, *Calais: An English Town in France*, pp. 92-3.
- ¹⁵ Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, pp. 78-9. Kermode demonstrates that in London in the period 1318 – 1497, between 16% and a staggering 49% of orphans left by merchants died before reaching the age of 21.
- ¹⁶ Hanham, *Celys and Their World*, pp. 248-9.
- ¹⁷ Jenny Kermode gives a good overview of the impact of bullion shortage on the wool trade. Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, pp. 165-6.
- ¹⁸ Margaret Aziza Pappano, ‘“Leve Brother”: Fraternalism and Craft Identity in the Miller’s Prologue and Tale’, in *Reading Medieval Culture: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Hanning*, ed. Robert M. Stein and Sandra Pierson Prior, Notre Dame, 2005, pp. 251-3.
- ¹⁹ Christina Fitzgerald, *The Drama of Masculinity and Medieval English Guild Culture*, London, 2007, p. 29.
- ²⁰ Gervase Rosser, ‘Going to the Fraternity Feast: Commensality and Social Relations in Late Medieval England’, *Journal of British Studies* 3:4, 1998, pp. 430-446.
- ²¹ Rose, *Calais: An English Town in France*, pp. 100-1, 105. George Cely lodged with ‘Bornell’s widow’ from sometime before July 1478 to at least the following summer; he seems to have had his own house by 1481. *CL*, no. 28, p. 26; no. 55, pp. 50-1; no. 142, pp. 129-30.
- ²² On the brothers’ ages, see Hanham, *Celys and Their World*, p. 8, p. 30. On George and Richard’s relationship, see Rachel E. Moss, *Fatherhood and its Representations in Middle English Texts*, Woodbridge, 2013, p. 40, pp. 171-2.
- ²³ William Cely’s precise relationship to the family is not known; despite their shared surname, he is never referred to as a relative, and he writes to all the family members with great deference. *CL*, ‘Introduction’, pp. x-xiv.
- ²⁴ *CL* no. 103, p. 90. ‘Camlet’ is a woven fabric made from goat’s hair.
- ²⁵ *CL* no. 32, p. 29. The other man is probably a ‘Thomas Redewhode’, burgess of Calais, who witnessed a lease for George in 1481.
- ²⁶ *CL* no. 105, pp. 92-3.
- ²⁷ *CL* no. 170, p. 158; Hanham, *Celys and their World*, p. 61.
- ²⁸ George Cely to Richard Cely senior, 12 March 1478, *CL* no. 45, p. 42. Hanham dates this letter as 1478/9, but 1478 seems more likely to me.
- ²⁹ George was extremely ill in October and November 1479, as multiple letters from his friends and family attest. *CL* 67, 70, 71, 73, 74, 76, 78, 80, 81, pp. 60-72.
- ³⁰ *CL* no. 72, p. 64, and no. 76, p. 67.
- ³¹ *CL* no. 44, pp. 41-2.
- ³² For more extensive discussion of this incident, see Rachel E. Moss, ‘An Orchard, A Love Letter, and Three Bastards: The Formation of Adult Male Identity in a Fifteenth-Century Family’ in *What is Masculinity? Historical Dynamics from Antiquity to the Contemporary World*, ed. John H. Arnold and Sean Brady, London, 2011, pp. 226-44.
- ³³ Moss, *Fatherhood and its Representations*, pp. 173-5.

³⁴ On apprentices' socialising, see Karras, *From Boys to Men*, pp. 128-9, Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London*, pp. 114-129, and P.J.P. Goldberg, 'Masters and Men in Later Medieval England', in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. Hadley, pp. 63-7. On social bonding between young men in contemporary society, see for instance Curry, 'Fraternal Bonding in the Locker Room', pp. 194-5, Clifton Evers, 'Intimacy, sport and young refugee men', *Emotion, Space and Society* 3, 2010, pp. 56-61, Scott Fabius Kiesling, 'Homosocial desire in men's talk: Balancing and re-creating cultural discourses of masculinity', *Language in Society*, 34, 2005, pp. 695-726, and Steven L. Arxer, 'Hybrid Masculine Power: Reconceptualizing the Relationship between Homosociality and Hegemonic Masculinity', *Humanity & Society* 35, 2011, pp. 390-422.

³⁵ *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ed. O.D. Macrae-Gibson, Early English Text Society O.S. 268, 279, London, 1973, 1979, II. 3585-7.

³⁶ Thomas Malory, *Malory: Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, Oxford, 1971, p. 80.

³⁷ Kiesling, 'Homosocial desire in men's talk', p. 696.

³⁸ Urban and landed elites alike saw sons typically marrying for the first time between the ages of 21 and 26. Peter Fleming, *Family and Household in Medieval England*, Hounds Mills, 2001, p. 22.

³⁹ Kiesling, 'Homosocial desire in men's talk', particularly pp. 712-18.

⁴⁰ Virginia Fisher and Sue Kinsey, 'Behind closed doors! Homosocial desire and the academic boys club', *Gender in Management* 29:1, 2013, pp. 48-9.

⁴¹ P.Y. Martin, 'Mobilising masculinities: women's experiences of men at work', *Organization* 8:4, 2001, pp. 602-605.

⁴² Arxer, 'Hybrid Masculine Power', especially pp. 404-18. The term 'hybrid hegemonic masculinity' was coined by Demetakis Z. Demetriou in 'Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique', *Theory and Society* 30:3, pp. 327-61.

⁴³ Laurence de Garis summarises and critiques this perspective in his "Be a buddy to your buddy": Male identity, aggression, and intimacy in a boxing gym', in McKay, Messner and Sabo, *Masculinities, Gender Relations and Sports*, p. 89.

⁴⁴ Allen Klein, 'Dueling Machos: Masculinity and Sport in Mexican Baseball', in McKay, Messner and Sabo, *Masculinities, Gender Relations and Sports*, p. 68.

⁴⁵ On somatic intimacy, see Garis, 'Be a buddy to your buddy', p. 97.

⁴⁶ On archery in everyday life, see Steven Gunn, 'Archery Practice in Early Tudor England', *Past and Present* 209, 2010, pp. 53-81, Paul B. Newman, *Daily Life in the Middle Ages*, Jefferson, NC and London, 2001, p. 165, and Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course*, Woodbridge, 2012, p. 56.

⁴⁷ Rosser, 'Going to the Fraternity Feast', p. 433.

⁴⁸ For more discussion on the role of feasts in guilds, see Laura Crombie, 'Honour, community and hierarchy in the feasts of the archery and crossbow guilds of Bruges, 1445-81', *Journal of Medieval History* 30, 2011, pp. 102-113.

⁴⁹ CL no. 142, p. 130. See also John Dalton's letter regarding the same matter, CL no. 141, pp. 128-9.

⁵⁰ CL no. 185, p. 170. His comment about this is somewhat opaquely worded – 'I trow Botrell woll nott dyshease yow off yowre howsse noo lenger' – but in the context of the earlier letters this seems the most obvious translation of his meaning. See also

Rose, *Calais: An English Town in France*, p. 107 and Hanham, *The Celys and their World*, pp. 264-5.