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PROVERBIAL SERVANTHOOD IN MIDDLE ENGLISH TEXTS: *SERVICE IS NO HERITAGE*

Abstract

This paper explores the proverb *service is no heritage*, focusing especially on its medieval attestations. The proverb warns servants of the perils of servanthood: service as an occupation will not provide an inheritance. After presenting the social and lexical contexts of the proverb, I move on to discuss its textual context, drawing on Middle English and later texts to discuss the proverb's thematic/discursive emphases, especially its religious undertones. I will show how the proverb's final word shifted from *heritage* to *inheritance*, and discuss how that may reflect the changes in concreteness of the two words.

1. Introduction[1]

"Service, I woot wel, is noon heritage", writes Thomas Hoccleve in his early-fifteenth-century work *The Regiment of Princes* (l. 841; Blyth 1999): working as a servant does not provide security later in life. This is the earliest extant English usage of the proverb *service is no heritage* (see section 3). This proverb has a later variant, *service is no inheritance*, which becomes more common over time.[2] Why did the final word of the proverb gradually change from *heritage* to *inheritance*? In this paper I will discuss how this lexical exchange may reflect the shifts in meaning of the words *heritage* and *inheritance*. I will also show that the proverb moved from a more religious to a more secular sphere. My emphasis in this paper is on Middle English instances of *service is no heritage*, particularly on two late medieval lyrics that have not received much attention: these lyrics are *If thou serve* and *In a chambre* (discussed in section 3.1). A diachronic perspective is adopted for discussion of the lexical shift.

Service is no heritage appears in collections of proverbs from the seventeenth century on, and turns up in various text types. The proverb may also be used in the present day, for instance in an online article on Victorian housemaids: "The old saying 'service is no inheritance' sums up life for these poor girls" (Ruthbro 2015). As in this recent example, many post-medieval occurrences, even as early as the sixteenth century, prefix the proverb with "an old saying" or similar qualifications. As such, *service is no heritage* can be classified as a proverb based on how it is treated in the historical sources, as well as on its inclusion in various collections of proverbs. Whiting (1968: xi) defines proverbs as "statements which convey a more or less obvious moral or lesson", and *service is no heritage* certainly does so,

[1] I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers whose helpful comments and insights improved this paper immensely. I am also grateful for the generous help of my supervisor Professor Matti Peikola, as well as that of the Philological Colloquium at the University of Turku. Naturally, any remaining mistakes are my own. This paper was completed while on a grant from the Finnish Cultural Foundation.

[2] I will use *service is no heritage* when referring to the proverb in general.

warning servants of the (financial) insecurity that comes of being employed as a servant. The proverb is concerned with what will happen to a servant once they are no longer able to serve. It means that the life of a servant is insufficient for providing financial security in life, with the underlying thought that working in service does not enable one to save for the future (see section 2 for more on the meanings of the proverb).

The proverb has not been previously examined at any length. Proverb collections including *service is no heritage* mostly merely list it and do not examine it further. In his dictionary of proverbs in England from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Morris Palmer Tilley (1950: 594, under S253), using the form *service is no inheritance (heritage)*, cites several instances from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. He also presents parallels in the proverbs *beauty is no heritage (inheritance)* (B171); *a king's favour is no inheritance* (K81); and *life is no sure inheritance* (L253). In a collection of proverbs and phrases from English writings from an earlier period, before 1500, Bartlett Jere Whiting (1968: 509–10, under S169) lists two of the same examples as Tilley, but includes more fifteenth-century examples. Due to the (understandably) limited scope of their work, neither Tilley nor Whiting go further into how the proverb was used. Tilley and Whiting have both determined that *service is no heritage* and *service is no inheritance* are variants of the proverb.

According to Richard Leighton Greene ([1935] 1977: 445), *service is no heritage* was "one of the commonest and longest-lived of medieval proverbs". Greene does not present sources for this claim. It is not possible to assess the relative frequency of *service is no heritage* without comparison to other medieval proverbs. In any case, making such claims is to some extent questionable due to the accidental nature of surviving manuscript evidence, as well as the oral nature of proverbs. But there is certainly support for the longevity of the proverb (see section 5).

The social context of late medieval servanthood and social hierarchies are of importance when examining *service is no heritage*. According to Rosemary Horrox ([1994] 2008: 61), service was the "dominant ethic of the middle ages". Hierarchy was an important feature of the medieval worldview. The hierarchical structure of the world extended from the lowliest slave all the way up to God, spanning the religious as well as secular tiers of power. Forms of service ranged from domestic to religious to military and further.

Service is no heritage reflects the fears related to service as an occupation. However, it can be postulated that in fact, rather than being fraught with insecurity, service in a medieval household – at least a noble household, the context of the two anonymous lyrics discussed in section 3.1 – would have been a rather secure option in life (see e.g. Horrox [1994] 2008; Woolgar 1999). Horrox argues that service "was perhaps the most effective method of social advancement in the later middle ages" ([1994] 2008: 67). Servants received material benefits in the form of food and board, clothing and wages, and

could be considered true members of the household, part of the family. Servants could be provided for when they could no longer work due to old age (Mertes 1988: 158; Woolgar 1999: 39). They might even be provided for after death: yearly masses could be held for dead servants on their master's behalf, an important benefit for a society that believed in masses shortening one's time in purgatory (Mertes 1988: 157). If their lord died, there were usually special arrangements for the servants ensuring that they were not left with nothing (e.g. Woolgar 1999: 39; Goldberg 2000: 18). Woolgar (1999: 45) states that especially concerning the "security of their livelihood" and the benefits they received due to being in the service of a lord, servants were in a more secure and privileged position than the majority of medieval society. Nor did service automatically mean low social status. A servant could be of noble birth, serving someone of higher status. The medieval hierarchy of service meant that even the mightiest lords with scores of servants at their command were themselves still servants before God.

Themes of insecurity appear frequently in late medieval literature: it was common to relate to earthly life (as opposed to eternal life in heaven) in negative terms (Davies 1963: 40–41). As the Wheel of Fortune – a common image in late medieval society – turns, "anyone who has risen must inevitably fall" (Horrox [1994] 2008a: 8). Service may have been a comparatively secure occupation, but the themes of the fleeting nature of all secular life in late medieval literature make the proverbial fear more understandable in its original context. Only God's service could be trusted not to succumb to the changing fortunes of the world.

This historical context provides the background for the discussion in this paper. In section 2, I will focus on the meaning and development of the proverb. In section 3, I will examine medieval uses of *service is no heritage*, and discuss potentially related collocations of the words *service* and *heritage*. I will explore the proverb's thematic/discursive emphases, which reveal religious undertones, in section 4, and discuss the shift of the final word of the proverb from *heritage* to *inheritance* in section 5. I will conclude that the shift may be related to the changes in concreteness of the words *heritage* and *inheritance*.

2. The meaning and development of the proverb

In this section I will discuss the meaning of *service is no heritage* and trace its development. In order to contextualise the proverb, I will first explore the definitions of the words *service*, *heritage* and *inheritance*.

Service is defined in the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED; s.v. *servise*, n. 1a) as a "state of being bound to undertake tasks for someone or at someone's direction; employment, employ". The word has several denotations, most of them related to performing labour for another person, and being obedient. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), s.v. *service* (n. 1, sense I; entry from 1912), defines

service similarly. Service to God also comes up in the definitions of both dictionaries (also in the form of church services), as does slavery. However, in the proverb, *service* would seem to be confined to the meanings related to secular service and the condition of being a servant, since the contexts it appears in underline the insecurity of service, sometimes juxtaposed with the security of serving God (see section 4).

The MED defines *heritage*, firstly, as "[s]omething legally inherited or inheritable" (1a, subsense a). In the same definition, the figurative meaning of "God or Christ as the heritage of the righteous" (1a, subsense b) appears. Sense 2a, "[a] spiritual inheritance", also foregrounds the spiritual connotations of *heritage*. The meanings of *heritage* are thus divided between spiritual and physical inheritance; the first attestations of both are from the early thirteenth century. By comparison, the denotations of *inheritance* (s.v. *enheritaunce* in the MED) are mostly confined to the secular sphere, although there are figurative connotations too, relating to religious inheritance (see section 5). However, in ME, *heritage* seems to have more connotations relating to spiritual/religious matters.

In the OED (entry from 1898[3]), *heritage* is defined in similar ways, with the first sense (1a) being "that which has been or may be inherited". *Heritage* thus also has a legal meaning. The OED also gives figurative meanings (1c), mostly citing medieval examples: "[t]he 'portion' allotted to or reserved for any one; e.g. that of the righteous or the wicked in the world to come". *Inheritance* is more confined to the secular sphere also in the OED, with the primary meaning being "[h]ereditary succession to property, a title, office, etc." (*inheritance*, sense I.1; entry from 1900). The OED also mentions biblical uses of the word as "[s]omething that one obtains or comes into possession of by right or divine grant" (sense II.4), with a cross-reference to *heritage*.

With this lexical context in mind, the meaning(s) of the proverb can be discussed. Two major interpretations of *service is no heritage* come up in the sources; I will discuss the early English sources in more detail below. Its main meaning seems to concern a single person involved in inheriting something: working as a servant does not enable one to save for the future and thus to provide security later in life. The second meaning involves two (or more) people, in which one gives something to the other as an inheritance: that is, a life of service, unlike other occupations, may not provide much of an inheritance for potential heirs. The second meaning is more in line with the concrete senses of *heritage/inheritance*, but the first meaning seems more prominent in Middle English (see section 3). Both meanings, however, concern the keeping or passing on of concrete items (see section 5 for more on concreteness).

A query on the origin of the proverb, as well as two responses, appeared in *Notes and Queries*

[3] There is a draft addition from 1993; see section 5.

(1853, 1854). The query, by the pseudonym G. M. T., asks: "'*Service is no inheritance*.' – Will you or any of your readers have the goodness to inform me what is the origin of the adage occurring twice in the *Waverley Novels* […]" (1853: 587). However, the responses to this query, from 1854, are short and do not in fact answer the original question very well. One, from the pseudonym P. C. S. S. (1854: 41), merely adds that the proverb is used in Jonathan Swift's *Directions to Servants.* The other (anonymous) reply states that the proverb has arisen from a manorial context, implying a medieval origin (1854: 20). Although the reply does not provide evidence for this, the proverb does seem to have arisen in a medieval context, since the earliest examples are from the Middle Ages and the proverb is tied to medieval notions of servanthood (as discussed in the introduction). The earliest English examples of the proverb are from the fifteenth century (see section 3). However, there are French and German attestations of similar proverbs from the twelfth century on. These predecessors of *service is no heritage* appear to be related to the favour of rather than service to a lord (cf. Singer 1998: 46–47). By the fifteenth century, a shift seems to have occurred in German from an earlier "Herrengunst" ('favour bestowed by a lord')[4] to "Herrendienst" ('service to a lord') (Singer 1946: 17). Singer considers the new form of the proverb to have arisen perhaps as a protest against feudalism.

Service is no heritage did not originate as an English proverb: it occurs (in some form) in several European languages in addition to German (see Düringsfeld and van Reinsberg 1872–75, vol. 1: 377, proverb no. 720; and Singer 1996: 227, proverb number 2.3.1 for *Dienen*, 'to serve').[5] The proverb may have entered English through French. In 1478, William Caxton printed a translation of the moral proverbs of Christine de Pisan (STC 7273). One of these proverbs is "Seruice in court is noo seur heritaige", a variation on *service is no heritage*. Pisan's French, from the early fifteenth century, reads (Roy 1896: 55, proverb no. 84): "Service a Court sy n'est mie heritaige, [/] Car souvent fault a petit d'avantaige" ('service at court is not such a heritage, because it often adds but little value'). The proverb was thus known in medieval French as well (cf. *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*, s.v. *service*). It also appears in the French text *Le Jouvencel* by Jean de Bueil (Lecestre 1887: 53), from the 1460s:[6]

(1) Et de là vint le proverbe qui dit : **Service de seigneur n'est pas heritaige**.
'That is the origin of the proverb that says: service to a lord is no heritage.'

[4] Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are my own.

[5] In Düringsfeld and van Reinsberg the proverb is "Herrengunst vererbt sich nicht", with examples from several Germanic and Romance languages; it is translated in English as "A king's favour is no inheritance". Singer has the forms "(Herren-, Hof-)Dienst ist unsicher (uneinträglich, ohne Erbe)": 'a lord's service or service at court is uncertain (unprofitable, without a heritage)'.

[6] Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, MS Français 24381.

The "là" that de Bueil refers to is a situation that he perceives as the way of the world: land acquired through conquest, for example, will give more security and last longer than that which has been acquired through the service of princes and lords. The proverb also appears in some early modern French texts.[7]

A French origin for the proverb is proposed in Robert Fabyan's *Fabyans cronycle newly prynted* (1533 edition, STC 10660): there "arose a prouerbe among the Frenche men / sayeng, *Principibus obsequi haereditariu*[m] *non esse*. The whyche is to meane, the seruyce of princes is nat hereditable". The English here is a direct translation of the Latin. Robert Gaguin's *De Francorum gestis compendium* (1504) may be the source of Fabyan's chronicle in this case, as the same section appears there: "Scitum propterea gallicu*m* prouerbiu*m* est principibus obsequi hereditari|um non esse", 'hence the French proverb aptly says that the service of princes is not inheritable'.[8] This may explain why the English translation gives the French proverb in Latin.

Service is no heritage has two main meanings, both related to passing on of concrete items. As I have shown, the proverb was not confined to English, and indeed was sometimes explicitly construed as of French origin, as in Fabyan's chronicle. I will next turn to discussing the textual contexts in which the proverb appears in early English.

3. Medieval usage

As mentioned in the previous section, the earliest English examples of *service is no heritage* are from the fifteenth century. Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes*, c. 1412, is the earliest known example according to both the OED and MED (and is quoted first in both Tilley 1950 and Whiting 1968). The OED quotes three instances of *service is no heritage* s.v. *service* (n. 1, sense I.1b), including the line from Hoccleve. The MED quotes Hoccleve's line under subsense 3a, "[s]ervice or employment in a lord's court or administration". It is possible that the MED considers the proverb to mean service in a lord's court, in particular – especially due to the courtly setting of *The Regiment of Princes*.

In the section of *Regiment of Princes* in which the proverb appears, the narrator laments that when he becomes old and is no longer able to serve at court, his purse will be empty and his future grim. The narrator of *Regiment of Princes*, like Hoccleve was, is employed in the office of the Privy Seal (Blyth 1999) and thus the proverb, here, might be taken to reflect the real-life worries of a man engaged in service. The instability of fortune is one of the themes in Hoccleve's poem, and *service is no heritage* as a proverb reflects that.

[7] For instance, Charles de Bovelles' *Proverbes et dicts sententieux* (1557), with "service de seigneur n'est pas héritaige" ('a lord's service is no heritage'); and "Service de grand n'est pas héritage" ('service of the great is no heritage') in Guy Miège's *Grammaire angloise-françoise* (1761), translated in the grammar as "Service is no inheritance".

[8] I have expanded the nasal abbreviations in italics. My thanks to Aleksi Mäkilähde for this translation.

Service is no heritage also occurs in several other edited medieval texts; unedited manuscripts might provide even more examples.[9] In the next subsections I will present medieval instances of the proverb, with a special focus on two little-studied late medieval lyrics.

3.1. The proverb in two late medieval lyrics

Service is no heritage, in various spelling variants, appears in two fifteenth-century didactic lyrics connected by their subject matter of servanthood: *If thou serve* and *In a chambre*. The lyrics are anonymous and deal with themes of servanthood and service in the context of a noble household. Their advice is aimed at young men working in service.[10] Based on their poetic form, they can be separated into two genres: the carol and the *chanson d'aventure*.

The carol as a genre can be defined as "a dance-song with a uniform stanza pattern and a chorus repeated after each stanza" (Fuller 2010: 271). The carol including *service is no heritage* is here called *If thou serve* after its first words. It deals with the uncertainty of servanthood, warning that a lord's favour is prone to change and declaring that God's service is the only secure thing.[11] R. T. Davies calls the carol "a warning to those who serve lords" (1963: 154); Greene, however, includes it among satirical carols. *If thou serve* has been edited several times.[12] Greene's edition is the most reliable of these, since his editorial principles are the most clearly delineated and consistent, and he has exercised less emendation than the other editors (see Greene [1935] 1977: clxxiii). *If thou serve* has four quatrains rhyming *aaa*, followed by a refrain (i.e. a repeated integral part of the stanza) consisting of the proverb *service is no heritage*. In this case, the proverb's meaning involves a single person involved in the process of inheriting something. The first stanza is representative of the lyric:

(2) If th*o*u serve a lord of prys,
Be not to boystous in thin seruys;
Dam*n*e not thin sowle in no*n* wys,
For **seruyse is no*n* erytage**. (Greene [1935] 1977: 226, carol no. 381)[13]
'If you serve a noble lord, do not be too crude or violent in your service; do not damn your soul in any way, for service is no heritage.'

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[9] The search for medieval instances of *service is no heritage* has mainly been done through the *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse* (CME), supplemented by sources located through e.g. Tilley (1950) and Whiting (1968). While extensive search of Middle English corpus material is beyond the scope of this paper, it might yield more examples of the proverb.

[10] Household servants in the Middle Ages were mostly male, although the balance shifted to mostly female in the early modern period (Woolgar 1999: 34).

[11] BL MS Sloane 2593, f. 8. It is numbered 1433 in the *Index of Middle English Verse* (IMEV). The *Digital Index of Middle English Verse* (DIMEV) have a slightly different numbering system, and *If thou serve* is now numbered 2407 in the online version.

[12] In addition to Greene, these include, for instance, Wright (1856), Chambers and Sidgwick ([1907] 1947), and Davies (1963).

[13] Italics original, indicating expanded abbreviations; this practice holds for all Middle English examples quoted in this paper.

The carol's quatrains are preceded by a two-line 'chorus' or burden in the form of a rhyming couplet: "Bewar, sqwyer, yema*n*, *and* page, [/] For seruyse is no*n* erytage", 'beware, squire, yeoman and page, for service is no heritage' (Greene [1935] 1977: 226). The proverb *service is no heritage* is thus repeated in the burden as well as in the stanzas themselves. In carols, burdens – invariable lines intended to be sung before the first stanza and after all stanzas – usually appear as independent couplets in Middle English (ME) literature. Unlike refrains, burdens are part of the lyric but separate from the stanza, and can be considered to be the primary distinguishing feature of carols as a genre (Greene [1935] 1977: clx).

It seems to have been a rather common practice for carols to have a proverb as their refrain: Greene ([1935] 1977: clxxi) lists some other carols that also make use of proverbs. *If thou serve* is quoted by Tilley in his collection of proverbs under *service is no inheritance (heritage)* (1950: 594, under S253), as well as in Whiting (1968: 509, under S169). Davies (1963: 334) calls *If thou serve* "a robust carol on a very common proverbial theme". Indeed, *service is no heritage* is not the only proverb in *If thou serve.* The carol also contains another proverb in a similar vein in its second stanza: "Wynt*er*is weth*er and* wo*m*manys thowt [/] *And* lordis loue schau*ngi*t oft", 'winter's weather and woman's thought, and lord's love often change'. This proverb, *lord's love changeth oft* (Greene [1935] 1977: 445; Horrox [1994] 2008: 73), emphasises that there is no security in the service of a lord, for lords can at any time dismiss their servants.

The second anonymous lyric containing the proverb *service is no heritage* is here called *In a chambre* after its first words. This lyric is extant in two fifteenth-century manuscript witnesses.[14] *In a chambre* considers the same themes as *If thou serve*, but expands on them, relating examples of situations in which service is disadvantageous as an occupation. The proverb turns up in the lyric's refrain, in this case the last line. Whiting (1968: 509, under S169) quotes Sandison's (1913) edition of the lyric as a fifteenth-century example of the proverb.

As a *chanson d'aventure*, the lyric is longer and more detailed than *If thou serve* (see Sandison 1913 for a discussion of the *chanson d'aventure* genre).[15] *Chansons d'aventure* enjoyed their heyday from around 1450 to 1500 (Davidoff 1988: 55). They consist of a 'framing fiction' – i.e. a type of opening strategy where a short narrative introduces the context of the lyric (Davidoff 1988: 17) – and the 'core' of the poem. The framing fiction typically involves a first-person narrator describing their

[14] National Library of Scotland Advocates 19.3.1, ff. 91r–92v and Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson poet. 36, f. 2. *IMEV* number 1446 / *DIMEV* number 2441.

[15] Sandison's account is not without bias, however; Judith M. Davidoff (1988: 19, 37) has criticised Sandison and claimed that the *chanson d'aventure* is "especially maligned" in the 1913 study. Sandison is indeed rather dismissive of her subject matter, treating the conventional aspects of the *chanson d'aventure* with disdain rather than viewing them as a neutral feature of the genre.

surroundings, after which they observe or participate in the lyric's events. The framing fiction of *In a chambre* involves the narrator standing in a chamber and observing a message embroidered onto a knight's hood; the message in question is the proverb *service is no heritage*. The narrator then continues to ponder the proverb and considers it truthful, moving on to give examples of the perils of a servant's life. These examples include servants who attire themselves like lords and then become destitute when their own lord dies of old age; a situation where a servant is dismissed due to not being able to serve his master any more; and great lords, yeomen and pages losing their office suddenly. The insecurity of life is a major theme in the lyric, and the concept of God's service being the only secure thing turns up in one of the two copies (see Section 4). *In a chambre* also upbraids servants for being complacent and too proud for their social status.

Service is no heritage acts as the refrain in this lyric, being repeated as the final line of each of its eight-line stanzas (rhyming *ababcdcd*). In each stanza, the proverb is syntactically integrated into the lyric, introduced by e.g. "for", "that", and "and". Thus, it is an essential part of the lyric and not simply repeated as a separate line. This is evident e.g. in the sixth stanza, from National Library of Scotland MS Adv. 19.3.1:

(3) wele is hym þ*a*t con a crafte
yf he will vse it more or lasse
yef his s*er*vece be hym be Rafte
he mey trawell in clennesse
And lyf in hose w*ith* owtton distresse
for co*n*ny*n*g is A secur stage
And s*er*vice as no sycurnesse
þen **þenke þ*a*t s*er*uece is no heritage** (NLS MS Adv. 19.3.1, f. 92r; Norja 2012: 74–75)[16]
'It is a good thing for him who knows a trade, if he will use his skills more or less. If his service is taken away from him, he will be able to work with purity, and live in a house without misfortune. For skill in a profession is a secure condition, and service has no security. Then think that service is no inheritance.'

This stanza contrasts the insecurity of service with the security provided by knowing a trade or occupation, and so being able to support oneself even if one is dismissed from service. As in *If thou serve*, the proverb here concerns a single person's security for the future. Later on in the lyric (stanza 8 in NLS MS Adv. 19.3.1), the narrator advises young men to "helpe yowre selfe w*ith* maryage" (Norja 2012: 75), that is, to help themselves with marriage. *In a chambre* presents marriage and trade as better alternatives to service. Marriage, in earlier times, implied children, and children generally provided for

[16] This example is from my edition of the previously unedited version of *In a chambre* found in NLS Advocates 19.3.1. Helen Estabrook Sandison (1913) edited the other version of the lyric found in Bodl. MS Rawlinson poet. 36.

their ageing parents. In an age before social security, having offspring might thus represent a more secure future. Of course, one might also marry into a more prosperous family and thus achieve security and an inheritance.

Most household servants in the Middle Ages were unmarried (Mertes 1988: 57, 180). Lords feared that if servants were to marry, their allegiances would be divided and they would have "another centre of conjugality" (Mertes 1988: 180) as opposed to the aristocratic conjugal couple that noble households were centred around. Since the unity of the household was important, any divided loyalties were to be avoided. The advice to marry in *In a chambre* might seem to be in contradiction to this; however, in the lyric, marriage is clearly presented as an alternative to service, not something to be done while still engaged in a service relationship. The lyric urges its addressees to help themselves with marriage, for lordship turns as does the wind: that is, a lord's loyalty to a servant is as changeable as the wind (cf. the proverb *lord's love changeth oft* discussed above).

The two lyrics on servanthood, *If thou serve* and *In a chambre*, provide a glimpse into the medieval worldview on servanthood; the proverb *service is no heritage* is used in them to emphasise the insecurity of service as an occupation. Before moving on to instances that are further removed from the proverb form, I will briefly discuss two further ME texts in which the proverb appears.

3.2. The proverb in other Middle English texts

In addition to the two lyrics on servanthood discussed above, two other extant ME texts also include the proverb in its full form. One of them is a fifteenth-century schoolbook from British Library MS Arundel 249, which includes English prose passages with model Latin translations, intended as exercises for students (Nelson 1956: vii). William Nelson (1956) edited the English passages, reordering them according to subject matter. *Service is no heritage* appears as number 263 in Nelson's numbering, under the heading "Good counsel":

(4) **Service is none heritage**, and that we se daily, for and the maister like not his servaunt, or the servaunt his maister, they moste depart. Furthermore, we se but few successours cheryshe suche servauntes as were great with ther predecessours. therfor, my frende, take hede to thiselfe while thou haste a maister and maist do moche with hym, that thou maist have wherwith to lyve whan he is gone. [...] tell me howe shall thei lyve? thei can no handycrafte, thei cannot skyll of husbondrye, thei thynke it a foule shame to fowle ther handes. (Nelson 1956: 61)

The passage expounds on the perils of not having security when a service relationship ends. Nelson refers to Tilley's (1950) dictionary of proverbs and remarks on *service is no heritage* that it "means that one cannot rely upon the hire paid by an employer as one can upon one's own possessions". The last sentences of this example are especially interesting when compared to example (3): here, too, working

as a servant is contrasted to knowing a craft and being skilful with one's hands. Considering that many servants must have had rather physical tasks, and been skilled at a profession (cooks, for instance), it might be suggested that the 'service' here could refer to being a personal servant to a lord, responsible more for companionship than hard physical labour. Since the proverb here turns up in a schoolbook, it might be possible that the book was intended for children who might later go into service in a lord's household, and thus might have needed a warning on the perils of trusting to service as an occupation.

A fifteenth-century Scots poem, *The Consail and Teiching at the Vys Man Gaif His Sone*,[17] includes the proverb. The poem follows the common concept of a father giving moral advice to his son; several poems on that topic are preserved in other fifteenth-century manuscripts (Girvan 1939: xxiv). The proverb is situated in the context of moral advice on how to be a good person. The man advises his son to "be weill-wyllyt in thin office [/] For heritage is na s*er*uice", 'be of kindly disposition in your office, for heritage is no service' (Girvan 1939: 76). The words *heritage* and *seruice* are inverted here, perhaps because of the constraints of rhyme. Girvan comments on the proverb, glossing it as "Office is not a hereditary estate" (1939: 156) and giving a reference to a proverb dictionary.

The full proverb *service is no heritage* appears in both ME prose and poetic texts and is used in various contexts. I will next discuss collocations involving structures that are reminiscent of the proverb.

4. Collocations of service *and* heritage *in Middle English texts*

In most of the examples discussed above, the proverb appears in its basic form, *service is no heritage*. Searching for collocations of *service* (or similar words) and *heritage* in *The Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse* (CME) produces some additional material reminiscent of the proverb. My preliminary survey of the collocations of these words shows that the collocations typically appear in similar contexts, all of them in the domain of religion.

It is difficult to posit a strict division between secular and religious discourse in the Middle Ages, and such a division is not necessarily fruitful. Fuller (2010: 272) has called the Middle Ages "a world in which finally everything has its meaning in relation to religion", and in view of Middle English literature, this certainly seems to be the case. Even though ME lyrics, for instance, have traditionally been divided into secular and religious (see e.g. Speirs 1957), there is no exclusively secular domain.

Considering the ME examples of *service is no heritage* discussed above, it can be seen that even in 'secular' lyrics the proverb could be linked to religion. The lyric *If thou serve*, after considering secular lordship and the insecurity of service, refers in its final verse to the benefits of serving God. The final line is a twist on the refrain: "Heuene to ben our erytage", 'heaven to be our heritage' (Greene

[17] Edited by R. Girvan from Cambridge University Library MS Kk.1.5, part 6.

[1935] 1977: 226). As opposed to the negative view of service presented in the previous verses, those in God's service will receive gifts, and heaven will be their inheritance (*ibid*.). *In a chambre*, as mentioned, exists in two manuscript witnesses. The version in MS Adv. 19.3.1 contains two stanzas more than that in MS Rawlinson poet. 36. The final stanza of the lyric in MS Adv. 19.3.1 is in essence very similar to that of *If thou serve*, stating that there is no secure service apart from God's; unlike lords on earth, he will never forsake his servants, and "his s*er*vice is gud heritage", 'a good inheritance' (Norja 2012: 76). This explicitly religious note only turns up in MS Adv. 19.3.1. *If thou serve* and one version of *In a chambre* thus show an interplay between religious and secular. The proverb *service is no heritage* seems to have had religious connotations in the Middle Ages as well as referring to the service of earthly lords. The collocations of *service* and *heritage* would seem to support this, as I will show.

The more secular examples of the proverb gain a broader religious meaning in the light of more explicitly religious texts with collocations very similar to the proverb. The earliest complete English prose Psalter, from the fourteenth century, contains a biblical reference bearing some similarity to the proverb *service is no heritage*. Psalm 37, verse 9 states "For hij, þat ben wicked, shal be don out of heuen; **hij, þat seruen our Lord, shul han þe heritage of heuen**", 'for those who are bad shall be driven away from heaven; those who serve our Lord shall have the heritage of heaven' (Bülbring 1891: 43). In the King James Bible, this is rendered "For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth"; the meaning here, however, seems a little different due to the change of the final word from *heaven* to *earth*. The heritage of heaven is mentioned in *If thou serve*, as discussed above.

The Lanterne of Liȝt is a Lollard tract from the very early fifteenth century (possibly around 1410), consisting of an exposition of the main tenets of Wycliffe's followers (Swinburn [1917] 1971: vii). A phrase with similarity to *service is no heritage* appears in the seventh chapter of the tract, in a discussion of the sixth Commandment and lechery ([1917] 1971: 103):

(5) Forsoþe knowe | ȝe þis vndirstonding. þat neiþ*ir* fornicarer neiþ*ir* vnclene filþe. neiþ*ir* avarouse wrecche. þ*a*t is **seruage of ydols haþ no heritage** in þe rewme of C*r*ist & God[18]
'Truly, know this interpretation: that neither fornicator, nor sinful person, nor miserly wretch, that is in service of idols has a heritage in the realm of Christ and God'

[18] Another Wycliffite text translates this as: "wyte ye this and undurstondeth as byleue of cristene men that vche lechour or vnclene man or auerous **man that serueth to mawmetis hath noon heritage in the rewme** of Crist, that is bothe God and mon", 'know this and understand according to the faith of Christian men that each lecher or unclean man or miserly man who serves idols has no heritage in the realm of Christ, who is both God and man' (Hudson 1983: 554). The Wycliffite text *Of Faith, Hope and Charity* (Matthew 1902: 348), also has *service* and *heritage* as collocates, referring to God's service as opposed to that of a secular lord: "**hijs seruice is liyt & hijs eritage is myche**, for it is the blis of heuen lastynge with-outen ende": 'his service is light and his heritage is much, for it is the bliss of heaven, lasting without end'.

Unlike *service* (see section 2), *seruage* as a word is linked more closely to slavery (MED, s.v. *servage*), with connections to the condition of serfdom. Swinburn glosses the word as 'bondage, slavery' ([1917] 1971: 182). It can be seen that the service done in example (5) refers to idolatry, and the desired heritage is in heaven. Wycliffite teaching was strongly against image-worship (Swinburn [1917] 1971: xiv; see also Hudson (ed.) 1978: 83–88).

In the section of the tract where *seruage* and *heritage* appear in example (5), it is clear that this is not an instance of the proverb, since it involves people in service of idols having no heritage in the realm of Christ and God. Here *seruage*, 'slavery', is used to refer to worshipping false gods instead of the condition of being a servant/slave. Example (5) comes directly after the same passage in Latin, which is a quotation from Ephesians 5:5: "Hoc eni*m* scitote i*n*telligentes quod om*n*is fornicator aut i*m*mu*n*du*s* aut avar*us* q*uod* e*st* **ydolor*um* seruit*us* no*n* h*ab*et hereditate*m*** i*n* regno dei & chr*ist*i" (Swinburn [1917] 1971: 103), 'For of this you can be sure, knowing that no fornicator, impure or greedy person (for that is idolatry) has an inheritance in the kingdom of God and Christ'.[19] *Lanterne of Liȝt* includes many Latin quotations and English renditions thereof; the author of *Lanterne of Liȝt* probably made his own Bible translations based on the Vulgate (Swinburn [1917] 1971: xv, 139–44). Thus, "seruage of ydols haþ no heritage" is biblical.[20]

In the Sarum Rite, the liturgical form used in late medieval England, Eph. 5:1–9 was the epistle for the third Sunday in Lent (Legg 1916: 73).[21] According to the *Repertorium of Middle English Prose Sermons* (O'Mara and Paul 2007), Eph. 5:5 is used in 23 sermon manuscripts. Most of the examples warn against idolatry and thus do not contain references to service in a more general sense. A sermon given on the fifteenth Sunday after Trinity, preserved in Bodleian Library MS Bodley 806, contains a reference to the impossibility of serving two lords. The sermon juxtaposes worldly and heavenly, or satanic and sacred matters (O'Mara and Paul 2007, pt. 3: 1787–89, sermon no. 047).

Considering the pervasive influence of biblical language in the Middle Ages and beyond, it is possible that the existence of a familiar passage in Eph. 5:5 may have influenced the development of the proverb *service is no heritage*, in English as well as other European languages. The influence of the biblical parallels may or may not be an influencing factor for the proverb appearing in many languages; but it is significant that European cultures were similar in their emphasis of service and social hierarchy. It cannot be claimed that the proverb originates from this Bible verse. However, the themes and the juxtaposition of service and heritage are certainly similar.

[19] My thanks to Aleksi Mäkilähde for his help with this translation.

[20] In the King James Version of the Bible, Eph. 5:5 no longer has the collocation of *servage* and *heritage*: "For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God."

[21] This is, in fact, still the case in the Book of Common Prayer used in the Anglican Church.

If the proverb was influenced by the Bible verse about the service of idols, it is not surprising that the proverb should end up in more secular contexts too, in relation to the practical service of a lord. The rhetoric of service is fundamental to Christianity, and the concept of service itself was linked to religion. Jesus himself is called a servant of God (Matt. 12:17–18), and several Bible verses call attention to serving others (e.g. Matt. 20:26–28). Servants and service come up frequently in the Bible. The word *service* is also used – and was used – to mean Christian worship and ceremonies such as the mass (cf. OED, s.v. *service*, n. 1, sense III.16). It should also be remembered that the clergy themselves were often servants even in the secular world, as noble households often employed a priest of their own.

The proverb is occasionally connected with religious discourse also in post-medieval usage.[22] However, the explicitly religious context is mostly confined to the Middle Ages.

5. Heritage *to* inheritance

In the medieval examples of the proverb discussed above, *service* is connected to the word *heritage*. In early modern and later texts, *heritage* mostly shifts to *inheritance*. In this section I will discuss this shift and its implications.

Inheritance as a word is used in ME (see section 2), but its meaning seems confined to the secular sphere to mean "that which has been or may be inherited, such as landed property" (MED, s.v. *enheritaunce*). It is also glossed in the MED as "heritage", however, and some figurative uses would seem to point at *enheritaunce* also having implications of spiritual inheritance. For instance, in Lydgate's fifteenth-century *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, "Only throgh ther dysobeisaunce They [i.e. Adam and Eve] ha lost ther enherytaunce", 'only through their disobedience they have lost their inheritance' (quoted under subsense 1c, figurative uses, in the MED). In the medieval sources, *enheritaunce* does not appear with the proverb, however: **service is no enheritaunce* is not found. The CME has many examples of *enheritaunce* (and spelling variants thereof), but they tend to be confined to actual inheriting of physical property and do not seem to have spiritual connotations.

Based on the MED, it seems that *heritage* as a word had a broader range of associations compared to *enheritaunce*. Many of these associations are related to spiritual matters. While the first meaning of *heritage* is "something legally inherited or inheritable" (MED, s.v. *heritage*), a figurative use already emphasises the religious connotations of the word: "God or Christ as the heritage of the righteous". In addition, subsenses emphasise spiritual inheritance. If *heritage* indeed had broader spiritual connotations during Middle Ages compared to *inheritance*, its use in the proverb at that time

[22] A sixteenth-century printed homily against idleness (1571), by John Jewel, also uses the proverb: "forgetting how seruice is no heritage, howe age will creepe vpon them". Two later references to this homily, quoting the proverb, can be located in EEBO.

seems reasonable, especially if one considers the potential influence of Eph. 5:5 (see section 4).

When did *heritage* shift to *inheritance* in the proverb *service is no heritage/inheritance*? It is of course impossible to pinpoint a precise time. Despite the semantic shift of *heritage* to include meanings connected to tourist attractions and cultural heritage (OED, s.v. *heritage*, n. 6a; an addition from 1993), thus giving the word new connotations, both *heritage* and *inheritance* are used in present-day English and the proverb can be understood even if the final word is *heritage*. However, some trends can be pointed out, and the semantic shift of *heritage* may have had an effect.

Post-medieval examples of the proverb are abundant in texts as various as cookbooks, letters, and a homily against idleness, ranging from the sixteenth century to the present day. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century printed books (searched for through EEBO-TCP[23]), the proverb can be found in both literary and nonliterary texts. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts mostly use *heritage*, but *inheritance* starts to appear in seventeenth-century texts. I will illustrate this through some examples.

Nicholas Breton (1577; STC 3654) uses the proverb (and various other lines ending in *heritage*) as a refrain in a 17-stanza poem on the woes of a servant, echoing the medieval usage: "It is Toms song, my Ladyes Page, [/] That **seruice is no heritage**". The end of the poem has references to the heritage of heaven, as God says to the page: "Be thou now frée, that werte a Page. [/] And heare **in heauen haue heritage**". Thematical and structural similarities to *If thou serve* can be seen here. The proverb is more than just an incidental saying; indeed, Breton uses it throughout to underscore the poem's central theme.

Early modern playwrights used the proverb; most notably, Shakespeare in *All's Well That Ends Well* (I. iii. 344; STC 22273): "**seruice is no heritage**, and I thinke I shall neuer haue the blessing of God, till I haue issue a my bodie: for they say barnes are blessings." The character speaking here is the Clown, a servant to the Countess, prone to wordplay.[24] The reference to one's children as a better heritage than service is also apparent in the lyric *In a chambre* (cf. section 3.1).

English sixteenth and seventeenth-century instances of the proverb include common themes of being worried about servants' future welfare after they grow too old to serve, similarly to some of the medieval examples. There is also distrust in the loyalty of masters to their servants. A famous eighteenth-century usage of the proverb is in Jonathan Swift's satirical *Directions to Servants* (1745; ESTC T069637): "that Service is no Inheritance, that your Work is great, and your Wages very small". As mentioned in the introduction, *service is no heritage* also appears in several collections of proverbs from the seventeenth century onwards: for instance, George Herbert's *Outlandish proverbs* (proverb no. 792, 1640; STC 13182); N. R.'s *Proverbs English, French, Dutch, Italian, and Spanish* (1659; Wing

[23] The *Early English Books Online* Text Creation Partnership generates searchable text versions of the books in the EEBO database (see http://www.textcreationpartnership.org/tcp-eebo/, accessed 6 November 2017).
[24] In this instance, *service* may also have sexual connotations (cf. Friedman 1995: 91).

R56); James Howell's *Paroimiographia Proverbs*, a collection of proverbs in English, Italian, French and Spanish (1659; Wing H3098); John Ray's *A collection of English proverbs* (1678; Wing R387); and so on. The form in all of these is *inheritance*.

It seems that there was a gradual shift in the proverb from *heritage* to *inheritance* during the seventeenth century.[25] There are only two eighteenth-century instances with *heritage* (located through *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*, ECCO). One of these is from a play by F. G. Waldron, *The King in the Country* (1789; ESTC N010948); this play, however, was roughly based on Thomas Heywood's *Edward IV* (1600; STC 13342), and the line with *service is no heritage* is almost identical to Heywood's. The other eighteenth-century example of *heritage* found in ECCO is from an epistolary novel entitled *The Husband's Resentment; or, the History of Lady Manchester* (1776; ESTC T070923): "for Service is no Heritage, as the Saying is" (vol. 2, p. 10). The context in all these is secular.

The shift of the final word of the proverb from *heritage* to *inheritance* may be related to concreteness versus abstractness.[26] The primary meaning of *heritage* today is abstract: "the history, traditions and qualities that a country or society has had for many years and that are considered an important part of its character" (OALD, sense 1). *Inheritance*, in contrast, has a concrete reference in Present-Day English: "the money, property, etc. that you receive from somebody when they die; the fact of receiving something when somebody dies" (OALD, sense 1). In ME, however, these two words seem to have had opposite values of concreteness. Both words came into English via French. However, the earliest attestation of *heritage* (a1225) is in a concrete meaning: "[t]hat which has been or may be inherited" (OED, sense 1a). The first attestation of *inheritance* (1390) is related to an abstract meaning "[t]he action or fact of inheriting" (OED, sense I, especially I.1). Before *inheritance* entered English, *heritage* could also be used in this abstract meaning. When *inheritance* became current in English, the two words were synonymous in the abstract sense. However, the proverb remained in the form *service is no heritage*, as the concrete sense was still also well expressed by *heritage*.

Inheritance gained a concrete meaning "[t]hat which is inherited; a heritage", especially with relation to property (OED, sense II.3) in the fifteenth century (with attestations from 1473 on), and was thus synonymous with *heritage* in the concrete sense. Since the two words could now both be used in a concrete sense, an exchange in the final word of the proverb became possible. However, it was only in the seventeenth century that there are attestations of the proverb with *inheritance*. A possible factor in this shift is a new concrete meaning of *heritage*, "that which comes from the circumstances of birth; an inherited lot or portion; the condition or state transmitted from ancestors" (OED, sense 4), the first attestations of which are from the seventeenth century. This meaning confines the word's meaning to

[25] The same lexical exchange occurs in the proverb *beauty is no heritage (inheritance)*, mentioned in the introduction.
[26] I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out and providing useful insights for this section.

the sphere of family inheritance and does not work with the meaning of the proverb, related as it is to household service. This is a possible reason for the change from *heritage* to *inheritance*. The proverb appears in dictionaries in its new form and its dissemination may have been facilitated by them, as *service is no inheritance* was the form being transmitted.

Heritage, in the present day, is a more abstract word than is *inheritance*; *inheritance* is used in legal situations, whereas *heritage* is used more for abstract matters. In the present day, *heritage* has predominantly cultural rather than religious associations. This may be connected to general Western trends of secularisation. As mentioned in section 4, the proverb's religious connection seems mostly confined to the Middle Ages. This may well be an indication of the development of the proverb in general: it moved from a sphere where it could also be connected to the heritage of heaven or God, to a sphere where it was mostly confined to the secular context of a servant's life.

6. Conclusions

Service is no heritage has remained mostly similar in form throughout its known existence: *service is no [x]*. However, its final word – as well as the contexts it is used in – has changed. I pointed out in the introduction that a servant's life in the Middle Ages was in fact rather secure, at least when it came to service in a noble household. In the early and late modern periods, a servant's life seems to have become somewhat less secure (see e.g. Hill 1996). The social stratification between servants and their employers also increased. In a sense, the proverb thus gained more truth with time.

A case for further, more wide-scale research could be to study servants and how they were perceived in English writing through time. *Service is no inheritance* is far from being the only proverb dealing with these themes; cf. e.g. the proverb *a young courtier, an old beggar*, which occasionally turns up in the same texts as *service is no heritage/inheritance*. *Trade is better than service* also appears.

This study has shown that *service is no heritage/inheritance* gained currency in the Middle Ages and lived on in common usage at least until the nineteenth century. The proverb continued to be used to some extent through the nineteenth century, in fiction, cookery books and magazines. From the medieval lyric *If thou serve* to Swift's *Directions to Servants* and onwards, the proverb encourages readers to be prudent and to distrust service as an occupation. The texts including the proverb are imbued with the same fear of domestic insecurity, and acknowledge that the life of a servant is not always easy.

The shift from *heritage* to *inheritance* may reflect the change in concreteness of *heritage* and *inheritance* respectively. Despite the final word mostly shifting to *inheritance*, in essence the proverb retains the same form as it did when Hoccleve declared that he well knew service to be no heritage.

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