CHAPTER 5

FRIENDS, ENEMIES, PATRONS

I thought upon a limerick.
I thought upon a riddle.
I started on a story,
But I stopped it in the middle,
For the story I had started
Was not, you see, the kind
That you tell at a kirk sewaree.

After that time men would stop
For the finish of the story at my
Side-street shop.
My business grew so rapidly
And so did my renown
That soon I was elected to the council of the town,
And they made me the convener of the sewerage committee
For the story I had started at the kirk sewaree.

From “The Kirk Sewaree”

The Significance of Association

The fraught character of premodern social life arose because little, if anything, came to you as your due, as certain, or just a matter of filing the appropriate papers and awaiting the check or the acclaim. People had no social rights. At every moment, the pursuit of legal claims, the establishment of power, and the protection of property was a social business requiring the support of others. Individual status was not certain, nor did a bureaucratic state apparatus neutrally process it. There was no such state, nor any other mechanism to separate the great mass of people from each other. You needed friends; you made enemies; and together these relations helped to

D. G. Shaw, Necessary Conjunctions: The Social Self in Medieval England
© David Gary Shaw 2005
define who you were as a social atom in the molecular structure of the town. Your connections to others and interventions on behalf of them were more important than we can easily imagine. We have already seen how complex medieval urban social interactions were. The records of arbitration and dispute settlement that we examine in chapters 3 and 4 start to make clear the extent to which people acted as each other’s brokers and abettors. We have seen how the manifold interests of individuals had to be balanced. Who you were in town was determined and reflected by your position in the structures of support that encapsulated your social actions. Nevertheless, certain eyes had a larger share in the creation of any social self. Your own perception was crucial, but also influential were those who watch you and act alongside you most often. Inevitably, the perceptions of the powerful would colonize you and you could rise and fall on their judgment. Whereas if they never saw you, you had almost no sociopolitical existence at all. To be a social being and a political animal was to be a member and a meaning to small groups of judges.

The prickliness and ambitiousness of the social person has been one of the latent themes of chapters 3 and 4. This is another way of understanding the need of the collective to limit and structure the independence of its members. The pursuit of honor, however, is an illustration of the constant pressure produced by conflicting trajectories of individuals that sorely needed to be forced into a sociable shape by arbitration and assumptions of stratification. Kant noticed this feature of human life and called it unsocial sociability. Social rules, orderliness and civility arise through our angers and ambitions, and, oddly, despite us.

The examination of arbitration revealed social standing as a central feature of the later medieval social self, but the context of agency was far richer than that. The individual act of arbitration was part of an ongoing and constantly developing set of patterns that should be understood from at least two relevant perspectives. On the one hand, they are acts and relationships among subsets of the broader community, reflective of small, probably informal and somewhat ephemeral groups, whose core membership and functions need exploring. Such groups are enticing in part because they are elusive, untouched by the heavy ideological over-determination of either medieval or modern assumptions, which have both mainly favored the large group or the individual as their analytic types. The small group is crucial but historically understudied.

On the other hand, however, pursuing the shape of interactions between individuals—the context of the perceptions that make the social self—will lead us to the emergent agent, who rises from the actions made in social life, who comes to his or her social consciousness only in this milieu of activity. This is so, even if our records are partial, as they are, suggestive of possibilities