

INTRODUCTION

The words “evidence” and “achievement” may appear odd, even paradoxical, when applied to the quests of medievalists. Yet, as editors of the present volume, the first devoted exclusively to medieval studies, we consider the scholarship here as both sign and result of highly significant change in the critical panorama of this field.

Ever since the Middle Ages took their place in the uneven sequence of western pasts, medieval literacy has occupied a central position in the scholarship of most medievalists. Subsequent redefinition of its uses along with the creation of specific disciplines, during the nineteenth century in particular, led to the emergence of a progressive contrast between oral and written forms. In recent years, post-structuralism has assumed and marked such dualism as one of the basic tenets of the western heritage. Of course, medieval legacies transformed such an inheritance in diverse ways. Just the same, medieval literacy gained hegemony and came to constitute *a sine qua non* in linguistic, literary and cultural research on the Middle Ages. Topics such as the perception of the past, the rise of individualism and social mobility, or the peculiar collisions and coincidences between the oral and the written, among others, are deeply interrelated to the fluctuating boundaries of medieval literacy. Material innovation in the textual universe throughout the key centuries of the Middle Ages could only spell a more profound and general commotion: “Men began to think of facts not as recorded by texts but as embodied in texts, a transition of major importance in the rise of systems of information, retrieval and classification.”¹ These centuries bear witness to the rise of self awareness and rationality as the defining figures that shape the medieval tapestry, enhancing, thus, divergent evolution of representational systems.

This volume is one more instance of the effort of medievalists in the twentieth century and the beginning of this one to come to terms with those matters. Currently, the survey of the available textual facts welcomes the technological aid of computerized systems, allowing an even more thorough grasp of medieval speaking, writing and compositional patterns, as the articles of Donald Scragg, “Spelling Variation in the Eleventh Century English,” and Jordi Sánchez, “Manchester, Chetham’s Library MS Mun.A.6.31 (8009): A Codicological Description,” make clear. Sánchez’s portrait of this particular manuscript performs the arts of codicology at their best, and reminds all of us of how indebted we always are to the steadfast enlightenment philological skills provide to modern approaches to medieval sources. Moreover, his close inspection of formal aspects of the manuscript reveals the internal classification of its contents according to certain medieval categories and encourages further research. Equally concerned with the merging of the latest methods and traditional handling of sources is Scragg’s article. The rise of electronic editions has challenged some methods, such as the schemes of Lachmann and Bédier, and can help avoid questionable scientific attitudes.² Likewise, careful use of such



innovation not only encourages but propitiates reconsideration of some academic givens. Scragg unveils the dubiousness of the up to now uncontested, late-twelfth century existence of a standard written variety of English. On equally solid grounds, Jeremy Smith's, "The Quality of the Middle and Early Modern English Short Vowels" scans widely accepted assertions and recurrent sources in order to point out the distinctiveness of causes for the lengthening of vowels throughout the centuries. Variation reveals itself as a phenomenon demanding greater perspective, one that widens the scope of the medievalist's comprehension. In the lexical domain, for instance, the correspondence of syntactic structures with particular levels of meaning has allowed M^a Auxiliadora Martín & Francisco Cortés to disclose the rich landscape of writing activity in Anglo-Saxon culture in "The Meaning-Syntax Interface of Writing Verbs: Templates, Constructions and Linking Rules within a Lexical Grammar of Old English Verbal Predicates."

It is in the stronghold of the written *littera* that nineteenth-century theorists developed a notion of literature that proved highly vulnerable when applied to medieval textuality.³ Ground-breaking studies on oral literature carried out by Milman Parry and A. Bates Lord undermined complacency about the existence of cultures where an exclusive orality or literacy prevailed. Instead, both modes would meet at different moments and adjust their limits within an original strategy of survival. The duality oral/written became merely essentialist, concealing a more profound and varied development of their forms. Nicholas Watson and Andrew Taylor devote their compelling contributions to these middle ways of literature. In "Was Grosseteste the Father of English Literature?," Taylor depicts the overwhelming spread of vernacular instruction brought about by the imposition of confession after 1215. This fostered not only vernacular literacy but the composition of Latin works as well. Thus, categories such as the learned and the popular, traditionally associated with Latin and the vernacular, or the written and the oral, and the inter-

¹ Brian STOCK, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1983) 62.

² Joan GRENIER-WINTHER, "Merciless and Merciful Ladies: Some Considerations in Moving from Print to Electronic Editions of Medieval Texts," *Medievalism and the Academy* 1, ed. Leslie J. Workman, Kathleen Verduin & David D. Metzger (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999) 239-256, 245, points out a particular trait of both methods: "Moreover, their attempts have fostered what has been called the 'conception of the unitary text', a unique, platonic ideal version of a work which is thought to exist above all other versions. In the case of a medieval text, this would be either a single authorial manuscript, or else a scribal copy which is thought to come closest to mirroring authorial intention. This conception is highly questionable, however, especially given the less-than-definitive nature of oral and manuscript culture in the Middle Ages."

³ In *Speaking of the Middle Ages* (Lincoln & London: U of Nebraska P, 1986) 23, Paul Zumthor describes some of the features of this literature as: "The conception of a reified object, the preeminence granted to the referentiality of language, and simultaneously, to fiction; the presupposition of the transcendent, suspended in empty space."

national and the nationalistic, respectively, actually nourished each other in a symbiotic way. A figure like Robert Grosseteste can actually personify such reciprocal blending between those extremes, and in addition, Grosseteste allows Taylor to underscore the invaluable, albeit ironic, role played by Anglo-Norman in the normalization of English as a literary language. Grosseteste's involvement in active nets of patronage and his collaboration with book traders heralded the character of future individual readers. Watson's "Vernacular Apocalyptic: *On the Lanterne of Lizt*" not only delves into the persuasive oral qualities of fifteenth-century spiritual writings in prose but also relates these devices and contents to ecclesiastical anxiety over the free dissemination and private possession of books. His fascinating presentation of a three-fold perspective of the text as a historical document of fifteenth-century misperceptions of lollardism, as an original captivating prose work, and as a key piece in the reformist literary canon allows a much more comprehensive vision of literature.

It is precisely in the fluid borders of the social, the generic, the moral and literary categories where Geoffrey Chaucer maintains his banner (and his fatherly rank). No wonder, therefore, that Ebbe Klitgård has been able to detect the tracks of orality in some of his poems. In "Chaucer as Performer: Narrative Strategies in the Dream-Visions," Klitgård analyzes the performative markers in these written poems, thus confirming the combination of the poet's direct performative role as a reader for courtly audiences with further projection of these pieces to silent and individual reading. But if Chaucer avails himself of the double current, according to Graham Caie's "'New corn from old fields': the *Auctor* as *Compiler* in Fourteenth-Century Literature," he also dances in the written firmament of *auctoritas*. A thorough consideration of glosses and their disposition in manuscripts encourages Caie to present a proud Chaucer, quite aware of his position as an *auctor*. Paradoxically, it is in the *marginalia* of these manuscripts where part of Chaucer's own marginality dissolves, unveiling a central figure, one who urges specialists to approach him from different angles.

One of these remarkable and novel standpoints may be found in Ruth Evan's thought provoking "Memory's History and the History of Criseyde: Chaucer's *Troilus*." Evans offers memory as the all-pervading motive that enables Chaucer's acute and committed sense of pastness, of the historical as characterized by writing, and therefore of the subsequent collective and individual responses and immersions in it. The ideological inflation of literacy calls for new definitions of temporal and spatial dimensions, and Chaucer's Criseyde reflects this growing concern with both the powers and crisis of memory.

To conclude, helping to offer even more evidence of achievement in the quests of medievalists —recent dynamism in the revision, production and reception of medieval studies— we congratulate ourselves for having travelled with such great company.

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