
Stephen Partridge & Erik Kwakkel (eds.). *Author, Reader, Book: Medieval Authorship in Theory and Practice.* Toronto/Buffalo/London: U of Toronto P, 2012, vi + 305 pp., 11 illustr., \$ 75.00.

This collection of nine essays on the theme of medieval authorship grew out of the Thirty-Fourth Medieval Workshop given at Green College, the University of British Columbia, in 2004. In his Introduction (3–19), Stephen Partridge explains that the editors' aim in the compilation of this volume was to bring scholars of the theory of medieval authorship into conversation with those studying specific instantiations of that theory, often from a literary historical or a codicological perspective. The chronological, national and linguistic scope of the collection is broad, and the methodological approaches pursued by the individual contributors are diverse. Nevertheless, for reasons I will come to in a moment, *Author, Reader, Book* rewards a linear reading. First I attempt a brief account of its individual essays.

It is perhaps one of the oldest chestnuts of historical studies of literary criticism that the theory and practice of literary analysis owes much to the tradition of bible study. In the first essay in *Author, Reader, Book*, "The Trouble with Theology: Ethical Poetics and the Ends of Scripture" (20–37), Alastair Minnis, doyen of medieval studies of authorship, opens with a brief restatement of this point, but he swiftly follows it up with a reminder of a perhaps less familiar truth, namely that, conversely, the "[i]nterpretative techniques and exegetical discourses characteristic of secular poetics often had a considerable impact on biblical exegesis" (20). It is the trouble attendant upon this disciplinary overlap that Minnis aims to elucidate; for if secular writers were quick to point out that the social status of poetry deserved to be elevated due to its stylistic and ethical affinities with scripture, attributing a poetic aspect to the bible also had the potential within the hierarchy of the medieval disciplines to threaten the authority both of the holy text and of those engaged in its study. In particular, Minnis points out, if the ethical ends of the bible could not be distinguished

from the ethical ends of poetry, then theology risked demotion to the ranks of the practical (as opposed to theoretical) sciences over and above which it traditionally reigned. Minnis considers the attempts of writers such as St. Bonaventure and Girolamo Savonarola to address this problem but concludes that it remained unresolvable since the “trouble with theology” relates precisely to the extent to which its insights can and should be made accessible to the broader church.

The remaining essays in the collection focus on localized realizations of medieval theories of authorship. They are arranged roughly in chronological order. In “Wit, Laughter, and Authority in Walter Map’s *De nugis curialium* (Courtiers’ Trifles)” (38–55), Sebastian Coxon departs from the consideration of an isolated anecdote about Map (*d. c.* 1210) that survives in a thirteenth-century hand in Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 32. The anecdote in question relates a witty put-down that the author is said to have delivered to a notorious miser, but what is most important for Coxon is less the tale *per se* than what its preservation in the Corpus manuscript can tell us about Map’s authorial status; for the recording of this anecdote and its attribution to Map suggest that in the later thirteenth century, in at least one quarter, the author had acquired the *auctoritas* that he famously complained was denied to him during his lifetime. Coxon proposes that Map laid the groundwork for his reception in *De nugis* by presenting himself as a skillful manipulator of the courtly witticism. His essay thus opens a discussion that is pursued in several of the following contributions concerning the extent to which a medieval author could shape his or her own “author-mythology” (38).

In “Late Medieval Text Collections: A Codicological Typology Based on Single-Author Manuscripts” (56–79), Erik Kwakkel proposes a more systematic taxonomy for composite manuscripts. He isolates four principle types of such collections: the manuscript copied in one go, the ‘booklet’ copied in one go, the manuscript in which a series of separate production units are bundled together and the manuscript or booklet which has been extended. Kwakkel describes the characteristics of these collections with principle but by no means exclusive reference to a group of books that variously anthologize the works of named Middle Dutch authors. This essay is an eloquent illustration of the insufficiency of the term ‘single-author codex’, which, it here becomes clear, obfuscates the complexly layered make-up of many of the manuscripts it has been used to describe. It also elaborates a typology that could be applied to several other kinds of late medieval manuscript collections, as Kwakkel points out, such as collections combining texts with a common use or texts from the same genre (73). Indeed, if we are tempted to view author collections as a somehow ‘special’ kind of late medieval manuscript, it will be useful to remember Kwakkel’s illustration of these codices’ thorough integration into the codicological landscape of the period.

In “The Censorship Trope in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Manciple’s Tale* as Ovidian Metaphor in a Gowerian and Ricardian Context” (80–105), Anita Obermeier offers a topical interpretation of Chaucer’s tale in which Phebus is read as a stand-in for the reportedly tyrannical Richard II and the crow is taken to represent the writer who is insufficiently cautious in his dealings with royal power. Her essay charts the descent of Chaucer’s story from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and suggests that in his depiction of the crow’s sorry fate Chaucer draws on a common apprehension of the Roman poet’s exile at the hands of Caesar Augustus. Obermeier suggests that the addressee of the tale’s warning was the poet’s friend, John Gower: Gower’s outspoken criticism of Richard II might have worried Chaucer so much that when Chaucer composed his tale he had his friend in mind as an ideal reader. This essay is rich in historical detail and constitutes a useful reminder of Chaucer’s propensity to speak to local as well as more universal concerns. Nevertheless, when one of the leading scholars of late medieval historiography has found that a key characteristic of English chronicle writing in the Middle Ages is its “propensity for criticizing king and government”¹, I wonder whether Obermeier has overdramatized the risk at which a writer who was critical of King Richard might really have put himself. Perhaps what the *Manciple’s Tale* is really about is the dangers of unguarded speech, an idea that ties in with Chaucer’s crow’s notable vocality and with his loss of his song at the close of the tale.

In “The Makere of this Boke’: Chaucer’s *Retraction* and Author as Scribe and Compiler” (106–153), Stephen Partridge argues that in the *Retraction* and throughout his oeuvre Chaucer saw the assertion of his bibliographic agency as an important aspect of his claim to literary authority; as such, Partridge suggests, the Middle English author echoes the concerns of his French contemporaries. Previous commentators on the relationship between the *Retraction* and the main body of the *Tales* have concluded that the work’s position at the end of many of the extant copies of the story collection reflects not Chaucer’s design but the work of scribal compilation. For this reason, Partridge begins by attempting to use the manuscript rubrics that introduce the various extant copies of the *Retraction* to demonstrate the likelihood of Chaucer’s involvement in its current positioning in the Ellesmere codex and elsewhere. The very detailed enquiry that ensues establishes that the addition of the *Retraction* and the preceding *Parson’s Tale* to the main body of the *Tales* was an early development in the textual history of the work, but conclusive proof of authorial intention remains elusive: this arrangement of the texts could still have been the work of Chau-

¹ Antonia Gransden, “The Chronicles of Medieval England and Scotland: Part I”, *Journal of Medieval History* 16 (1990): 139.

cer's earliest scribes. Partridge's discussion of Chaucer's self-presentation as a maker of books thus rests on less sure ground than do the analyses of Middle French authorial self-presentation included, for example, in Sylvia Huot's *Song to Book* or McGrady's essay in this volume, as Partridge himself acknowledges.² Nevertheless, in a critical climate that traditionally focuses on the strategies Chaucer deploys to distance himself from his texts, Partridge's concentration on the author's desire in the *Retractions* to be identified as the manufacturer of his books (even those he disowns) is salutary. This essay also illuminates an important context for the self-publicatory projects of fifteenth-century writers such as Thomas Hoccleve and Margery Kempe, who are even more eager than Partridge's Chaucer to stress their own participation in the production of the manuscripts of their work.

Deborah McGrady's "Reading for Authority: Portraits of Christine de Pizan and her Readers" (154–177), advances a reassessment of this author's literary career that lays particular emphasis on her self-presentation as a flexible and skillful reader. Where her opponents in the *Querelle de la rose* attempted to discredit her as a thoughtless skimmer of the text, McGrady shows that, throughout her oeuvre, Christine is keen to highlight her mastery of a broad range of reading skills, from the new rapid reading techniques associated with late medieval study to the more traditional reflective mode of reading schematized, for example, in the early twelfth-century *Didascalicon* of Hugh of St. Victor. By underlining her mastery as a reader, both in her textual self-descriptions and in the manuscript portraits commissioned to decorate the extant copies of her works, McGrady illustrates that Christine is able to carve out a space for herself as a woman writer whose authority is distinct both from that of the clerical class, with which she so frequently came to blows, and the laity, whom she aimed to instruct through her writing. A key component of that instruction, McGrady concludes, is Christine's attempt to engage her readership in a close reading of her manuscripts (for example, through the use of anagrammatic signatures). By positioning Christine's manuscripts at the centre of her analysis, McGrady is able to offer a new and invigorating appreciation of this author's understanding both of her position in the literary climate she inhabited and of the relationship into which she hoped to enter with her readership.

2 Sylvia Huot, *From Song to Book: The Poetics of Writing in Old French Lyric and Lyrical Narrative Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987). It is notable too that the attribution to Chaucer of the "Wordes to Adam" stanza that also features in Partridge's analysis of Chaucer's material bookishness has recently been contested in A. S. G. Edwards, "Chaucer and 'Adam Scriveyn'", *Medium Ævum* 81 (2012): 135–8.

Kirsty Campbell's essay, "Vernacular *Auctoritas* in Late Medieval England: Writing after the *Constitutions*" (178–197), participates in the on-going reassessment of the effects of Arundel's *Constitutions* (1409) on the composition and circulation of texts of vernacular theology in the fifteenth century. Taking as her test case the surviving writings of Reginald Peacock (c. 1390–1460), Campbell illustrates that the constrictions on the discussion of the tenets of the faith outlined in the *Constitutions* did not prevent Peacock from elaborating on orthodox formulations of the nature of the Trinity, among other topics, with a view to facilitating lay understanding. Moreover, since in his writings he suggests that both Latin and vernacular works should be judged according to their grounding in reason and faith, Campbell argues that Peacock's example challenges a straightforwardly hierarchical apprehension of the relationship between Latin and Middle English in this period. Thus, Campbell concludes, we should "revise our view of the production of religious writing in fifteenth-century England by considering what [Peacock's] works can tell us about a growing sense of possibility and flexibility in creating texts in the vernacular that would revitalize the Christian community" (193). Campbell avoids discussion of Peacock's trial for heresy in 1457 and his subsequent demise, probably for reasons of space. Still, I would have been interested to read how that fate squares with the "growing sense of possibility and flexibility" (193) in Peacock's writing that Campbell so ably delineates.

The last two essays address Middle Scots and Neo-Latin writing. I am briefer here since these areas fall further outside the realm of my own experience. In "Master Henryson and Father Aesop" (198–231), Iain Macleod Higgins discusses Henryson's evocation of the classical fabulist in his *Morall Fabillis*. Whereas contemporaneous representations of Aesop on the Continent and in England present the author as a somewhat grotesque figure, in a sequential close reading of the *Fabillis* Higgins delineates Henryson's establishment of Aesop as a "righteous pagan" (223) whose example authorizes his own excursus into the fable genre. Finally, in "Erasmus's *Lucubrationes*: Genesis of a Literary Oeuvre" (232–262), Mark Vessey embarks on an exploratory account of Erasmus's career as a printed author. Vessey works outwards from the description of Erasmus's *Lucubrationes* given on the frontispiece of the 1515 Strasbourg edition of that work to trace the development of the idea of the author's Complete Works that would be realized in his posthumous *Opera omnia* (Basel, 1538–40).

It will be seen, then, that *Author, Reader, Book* addresses the theory of medieval authorship less often than it does its practical manifestations, but this need not weaken the collection's appeal since the conjunction of these studies suggests with new clarity the pertinence of a range of theoretically inflected questions. Considering the varying degrees of emphasis that writers like Chau-

cer (as explicated by Partridge) and Christine (as explicated by McGrady) place on their bibliographic agency, for instance, we might wonder to what extent the currency of a given “author-mythology” (to borrow Coxon’s term) is dependent on the language in which a given author writes and the book cultures into which he or she thus inscribes him- or herself (these last two issues are also touched upon in Campbell’s, Kwakkel’s and Vessey’s contributions). Likewise, having considered the negotiations of religious and regal authority that shape the writing of Peacock (as explicated by Campbell) and of Chaucer (as explicated by Obermeier) we might start to think afresh about the conditions under which a medieval author could be called to account for his or her work. These are just two examples of avenues of thought that are opened up in *Author, Reader, Book*; Partridge in his Introduction and the individual contributors in their essays pick out several others. As Medieval Studies becomes increasingly fragmented along linguistic and disciplinary lines, broadly conceived collections such as this one deserve a particularly warm welcome.

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