Medieval Autographies: The "I" of the Text by A. C. Spearing (review)

Rory G. Critten
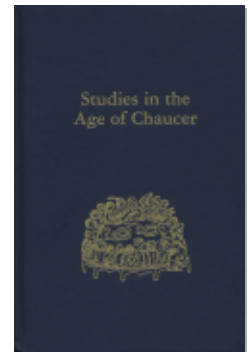
as it was for Hoccleve or Usk. Making a book is still a collaborative process, and we need all of these different kinds of text-workers if we want to be able to read actual books. It would be nice if government funding or infinite philanthropy could make books available to all, free at the point of use, but since that isn't happening, I think readers and libraries—rather than authors or their patrons—should pay for the production of books. Open access is a crucial and complicated issue: we need to ensure fair access for the institutionally less privileged, as both readers *and* as authors, and we also need to support our colleagues in the publishing industry if we want the book as material object to continue to be part of our scholarly landscape.

<div align="right">

MARION TURNER
Jesus College, Oxford

</div>

A. C. SPEARING, *Medieval Autographies: The "I" of the Text*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. Pp. viii, 347. $32.00 paper.

In this book, A. C. Spearing revisits the central claims made in his *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). The guiding conviction there and in *Medieval Autographies* is that modern critics of Middle English literature misrepresent the works that they attempt to explicate when they apply the same set of interpretative categories to their texts as those that were developed for the analysis of nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels and poems. In particular, Spearing asserts, unlike the dramatic monologues of Kazuo Ishiguro and Robert Browning, the "I" of a Middle English poem "*may* refer to a fictional individual . . . whose consciousness the writing purports to represent" but "it does not necessarily do so" and "rarely does so in any clear-cut or systematic way" (13, emphasis in original). Closely bound up with this argument is a rejection of the assumption, which Spearing finds commonplace, that a medieval author's purpose "would be to produce a text coherent in perspective and ideology," and that "he or she could normally be expected to be perfectly in control of the text in fulfillment of this aim" (3). Although "discovering planned intricacies of structure

provides an endless supply of material for books and articles'' (120), the time has now come to reconsider the pleasure that is produced by the improvised and arbitrary aspects of late medieval literary creation.

In *Textual Subjectivities*, Spearing divided his attention between the familiar generic groupings of Middle English narrative and lyric poetry. *Medieval Autographies* argues for the previously unrecognized coherence of a body of writing encompassing ''extended, non-lyrical, fictional writings in and of the first person'' (1), which Spearing calls ''autography.'' The texts in this category are related to and perhaps anticipatory of the modern autobiography, but they distinguish themselves from works in that genre because, in the case of medieval works, ''[autography] is first-person writing in which there is no implied assertion that the first person either does or does not correspond to a real-life individual'' (7). What is of interest here is not whether the events recounted in a particular work actually happened to their author, but rather the means by which autography evokes proximity and something that Spearing calls ''experientiality,'' that is, ''the literary illusion of experience separable from any individual experiencing consciousness'' (20). In a move that will doubtless prompt further work on the interrelation of French and English literature in late medieval England, Spearing suggests that Chaucer and his followers elaborated this mode of writing under the influence of the Middle French *dit*.

In order to make the case for his new generic category, Spearing offers detailed analyses of a handful of Middle English texts, including *Wynnere and Wastoure* (Chapter 1), the Knight's and the Reeve's prologues and tales (Chapter 2), the *General Prologue* and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* (Chapter 3), the Prologue to Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes* (Chapter 5) as well as his *Series* (Chapter 6), and Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* (Chapter 7). As was the case in *Textual Subjectivity*, many of the opening arguments in *Medieval Autographies* are corrective. The recent critical histories of the Knight's and the Reeve's texts are reviewed with the intention of exemplifying the putative misreadings that can proceed from the assumption that Chaucer uses his pilgrims' stories to flesh out their characterizations. Spearing likewise cites, largely in order to dismiss, claims for the thematic unity both of Hoccleve's *Regiment* and of Bokenham's *Legendys*. In each case, this ground-clearing precedes a welcome reevaluation of the work of the authors addressed, not as life-writers or as exponents of a particular *idée fixe*, but rather as poets actively engaged in the exploration of their own craft. The book's fourth

chapter plays a crucial role in explaining this turn. Here, Spearing argues that, despite the strictures of grammarians such as Geoffrey of Vinsauf, whose *Poetria nova* is so frequently cited by both modern scholars and medieval writers, the forms assumed by much Middle English literature owe a good deal more to improvisation and experimentation than to forward planning. This shift of perspective allows Spearing to re-present his star authors as inventive risk-takers; as masters in the art of "free composition" (49); and, moreover, as writers who expect their readers to enjoy the spectacle of their work-in-progress. In Chapter 6, for example, Spearing highlights Hoccleve's detailed description of the compilation of his *Series* in the *Dialogue* section of that work. Indeed, while many scholars will remain sensitive to Hoccleve's insistence on the co-identity of his narrator and his historical person, Spearing's account of this writer's self-conscious artistry may be one of the most valuable insights offered in *Medieval Autographies.*

Readers will judge for themselves the degree to which Spearing's engagement with his fellow medievalists is constructive. My own feeling is that a more sustained interaction with book historians and codicologists could have strengthened the case for autography. I am thinking here of recent work on fifteenth-century habits of compilation that discusses the willingness among late medieval readers to conceive of the person of the author as the originator of a work or body of works—a phenomenon not confined to France but present in England as well (see, for example, Alexandra Gillespie's *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and Their Books, 1473–1557* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006])—a burgeoning discussion that is only briefly acknowledged in *Medieval Autographies* (63). An assessment of the diverse single- and multi-author manuscripts and the early print books in which Spearing's writers' works traveled might have helped him sharpen his readers' focus on the often ambivalent relationship he posits between the "I" of a Middle English text and its historical referent. Finally, notwithstanding Spearing's clear distrust of critical orthodoxies, some readers may be struck by what often feels here like a return to the Chaucerianism of mid-twentieth-century scholarship. Spearing attributes much that he finds worthy of notice in Hoccleve and Bokenham to the earlier poet's influence. Some of the connections he makes are illuminating: the Prologue to the *Regiment of Princes* may perhaps owe something to Chaucer's *Pardoner's Prologue*, for example. Other links feel more strained. Must the "chief model" (240) for

Bokenham's depreciation of his poetic skill be *The Franklin's Prologue*, especially when Bokenham names Cicero and Claudian as his points of reference in the same lines that Spearing cites?

Medieval Autographies does an excellent job of highlighting both the fluidity of the Middle English poetic "I" and the inventiveness of some of its more familiar wielders; the chapter on Bokenham offers a useful introduction to that neglected writer's output. Whether or not "autography" sticks as the term used to describe the poems addressed in this study, Spearing's sensitive close readings will ensure the abiding interest of his book. Particularly memorable among the many glowing examples of this mode of criticism here is Spearing's extended rendition of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* not as Alisoun's speech, as we might be used to hearing it, but as the poet's own *dit*-inspired textual performance "as an English pantomime dame . . . Chaucer in drag" (86–87). At the same time as he illustrates the fruitfulness of his approach to Chaucer, Spearing also reassures his reader that abandoning familiar narrator-based readings of the author's work need not take all the fun out of explication.

Rory G. Critten
University of Fribourg, Switzerland

Emily Steiner. *Reading "Piers Plowman."* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. 273. $85.00 cloth; $27.99 paper; $22.00 e-book.

Reading "Piers Plowman" is a much needed and welcome tool for scholars who teach and write about Langland's knotty poem. The book offers a sustained, insightful critique of the text's major movements and themes; at the same time, it makes the broader argument that the poem desires to redeem not just individual Christian souls but the English language itself. This is the well-told story of "how an English poetics can perform the work of Latin rhetoric, and in the process, fashion a truly literary theological vernacular" (210).

An informative prologue sets the stage for the detailed readings that follow. It documents the poem's use of the alliterative long line, its multilingual *habitus*, and its transformation of the French tradition of dream-vision allegory. The poet domesticates his Continental inheri-