A COMPANION TO

MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE AND CULTURE

C.1350–C.1500

EDITED BY **PETER BROWN**

Blackwell
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A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture
c.1350–c.1500

Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture

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Canterbury
May 2006

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Quotations from writings by Geoffrey Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

Quotations from the Bible are from the English translation of the Latin Vulgate, otherwise known as the Douay–Rheims version.

Abbreviations

CYT	Canon's Yeoman's Tale
DNB	*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, new edn, 60 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)
EETS	Early English Text Society
es	extra series
FrankT	Franklin's Tale
FrT	Friar's Tale
GP	General Prologue
IMEV	Carleton Brown and Rossell Hope Robbins, *Index of Middle English Verse* (New York: Columbia University Press for the Index Society, 1943)
KnT	Knight's Tale
LGW	*Legend of Good Women*
ManT	Manciple's Tale
ME	Middle English
MED	*Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath, Sherman M. Kuhn and Robert E. Lewis, 12 vols (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1954–2001)
MilP	Miller's Prologue
MilT	Miller's Tale
MkT	Monk's Tale
MLT	Man of Law's Tale
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 20 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)
os	original series
PardP	Pardoner's Prologue
PardT	Pardoner's Tale
ParsP	Parson's Prologue
PhyT	Physician's Tale

PL	*Patrologia Latina: Patrologiae cursus completus . . . series Latina (prima)*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols (Paris: 1844–64)
REED	*Records of Early English Drama* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979–)
RvT	Reeve's Tale
SIMEV	Rossell Hope Robbins and John L. Cutler, *Supplement to the Index of Middle English Verse* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965)
SNT	Second Nun's Tale
SqT	Squire's Tale
ss	supplementary series
STC	Pollard, A. W. and Redgrave, G. R. (eds), *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland and Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad 1475–1640*, rev. W. A. Jackson, F. S. Ferguson, and K. F. Pantzer, 3 vols (London: Bibliographical Society, 1976–91).
SumT	Summoner's Tale
TEAMS	The Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages
TC	*Troilus and Criseyde*
WBP	Wife of Bath's Prologue
WBT	Wife of Bath's Tale

Introduction

A volume such as this would have been impossible ten years ago. Then, the accent in late medieval English literature was on the 'literary'. Geoffrey Chaucer was in the foreground, shadowed by William Langland and the *Gawain* poet. The fifteenth century was dominated by Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* and the mystery plays, which often seemed like the last gasp of the old order before Humanism and the Reformation destroyed it for good. Medievalists occasionally made forays into critical theory – if only to demonstrate that St Augustine had anticipated Jacques Lacan – and into neighbouring disciplines, especially history, but by and large they gave the impression that the traditional approaches to the traditional canon gave them plenty to do.

That insularity has now gone. The category of 'literature' has broadened and deepened to include other kinds of writing, especially of the religious variety. Of course, religious writing has always been an unavoidable component of medieval literature more generally, insofar as it occurs in the works of canonical authors. But the centrality of religious writing – of which there is an enormous amount as yet under-studied – is now more generally acknowledged as a means of coming to terms with distinctive and influential structures of thought, feeling and representation. Manuals of religious instruction, devotional treatises and mystical writing have been subject to the same kind of scrutiny once reserved for, say, the *Canterbury Tales*. A major impetus for this redirection of focus has been the recognition that the ideas of John Wyclif and his Lollard followers, who placed a high value on literacy, texts, translation and interpretation (especially of the Bible), are crucial to an understanding of the more general status, circulation and meaning of late medieval writing. Furthermore, the polemical works produced by Wycliffites, and the measures taken to counteract them, take us to the heart of religious and political ideology and controversy, offering fascinating and complex objects of study, and providing insights into questions of authority, translation and censorship.

At the same time, more general processes of literary production have become a key interest: the ways in which manuscripts and early printed books were made, how texts

circulated, who commissioned, owned and read them, how literacy interfaced with orality, all impact on the interpretations available to readers in the twenty-first century. Within networks of production and reception, women are now seen as having had functions and roles at once distinctive from and equivalent to those enjoyed by men. The same is true of authorship itself. In recent years, the writings of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, in particular, have been subject to intense analysis and debate – a process that is beginning to provide some redress for the previous emphasis on male authorship.

New approaches and new texts have brought into play a wide range of theoretical positions, but critical theory is no longer treated as a thing apart; rather, it is a tool to be integrated with the acts of close reading and interpretation. If a particular approach has become dominant, it is the one (existing in manifold versions and applications) that insists on the vital importance of cultural contexts. Those contexts might be religious, or concern social hierarchy or urban life, or extend to the ways in which late medieval society itself constructed narratives of its own experiences in, say, the form of chronicles. More widely still, the contextualizing framework might include the way in which an entire culture reacts to, engages with and represents the values of another, be they those of continental Europe or of ethnic groups often perceived as threats, such as Jews and Saracens. Whatever the context it is not used – as it formerly might have been – as backdrop, but as one side of a dialogue in which the other interlocutor is the text itself.

A consequence of the changes in focus and perception outlined above is that the timeline of late medieval English literature now looks different. Many more interesting developments are happening in the fifteenth century than was formerly thought to be the case. The medieval and later periods do not now look so fragmented and discontinuous: for one thing, proto-Reformation ideas are shaping literature a century or more before the event. And the framing of cause and effect has become more generous, less narrow: to understand attitudes to the East as they surface in late medieval romance it is necessary to look at earlier experiences of crusade; to follow through the implications and potential of morality drama we need to look at sixteenth-century examples.

A Rumpelstiltskin absent from late medieval English literary studies for ten years would nevertheless find in the present volume some familiar features: it incorporates, as necessary, traditional literary history, and insists on the importance of understanding key linguistic principles of dialect and pronunciation. The newly awakened critic, perhaps after ten years too bleary-eyed to stamp his foot in chagrin, would notice the continuing use of Chaucer as a touchstone for the work of other writers, but would have to recognize that, if not belittled, he is embedded within a much wider framework of literary and cultural activities than formerly. Moreover, those writers once represented primarily as his disciples, notably Thomas Hoccleve, John Gower, John Lydgate and Robert Henryson, are now given much greater prominence on account of their individual merits. Rumpelstiltskin would have to acknowledge, if ruefully, that much excellent new work has been done, however much remains to be done.

A number of factors account for the 'new map' of late medieval English literature. Several are common to the discipline as a whole: the embedding of theory within critical practice; a more catholic sense of what constitutes literature; the disestablishment of a traditional canon; a recognition of the importance of cultural contexts; an interest in the application of postcolonialist approaches to other periods of literature. Some factors special to the study of medieval literature are the outcome of tendencies that have been long in the making but which have now borne fruit. A number have been helped by small but regular and focused conferences, and the publication of their proceedings, as in the cases of manuscript and early book studies, translation and mysticism. Others are the culmination of work by influential scholars who have argued persuasively and consistently for the importance of particular cultural contexts (Lollardy, for example) or for particular approaches (say, through social history). The end result is a field of study which at the present juncture is particularly progressive, open and interactive. No longer is late medieval English literature a series of fragmented minority activities. Instead, as the present volume shows, there is a strong sense of shared interests and common endeavour – seasoned, as always, by a healthy pinch of controversy.[1]

So much for developments within the study of late medieval English literature. How have they affected perceptions of the development of the literature itself? Two authoritative works, recently published and regularly cited in the following chapters, offer their own narratives. The one provided by David Wallace, editor of *The Cambridge History of Medieval Literature* (1999), covers the period 1066 to 1547 with thirty-one essays from different contributors, and is designed as a sequential account of changing literary cultures. It is an account that contrasts with received orthodoxies. Its span puts the 'bottleneck' of the late fourteenth century into a much broader perspective; and it opposes the idea – prominent in the earlier *Cambridge History of English Literature* – that the evolution of literature is tied to the development of national identity. Instead, Wallace's volume aims to defamiliarize present-day assumptions, resist a grand narrative, and capture instead 'some sense of the strangeness, the unlikeliness, the historical peculiarity, of medieval compositional processes' (xiv).

Medieval English literature suggests a multiplicity of possible narratives, not least of which is one that questions the very idea of an 'English' literature without reference to the literatures of Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Similarly, the category of literature itself is not to be confined – as it has been by older critical practice – to works of genius and artistic excellence, but should be broad and inclusive. As far as possible, a medieval text should not be viewed in the isolated and distorting frameworks of modern print production, but instead as a part of a process that brings into play the manuscript culture and social system within which it appeared. That system was Christian, and it is pointless to pretend that medieval literature is a conceptual sphere distinct from the religious one. Thus, the study of the culture of the past, in its fullest sense, provides the best means of understanding the literary compositions produced within it:

> Medieval literature cannot be understood (does not survive) except as part of transmissive processes – moving through the hands of copyists, owners, readers and institutional authorities – that form part of other and greater histories (social, political, religious and economic). (Wallace: xxi)

By contrast, James Simpson in his single-authored *Reform and Cultural Revolution* (2002) – the second volume of the Oxford English Literary History – shows no compunction about creating an overarching schema to explain developments in the history of English literature from 1350 to 1547. For him, the period displays a 'narrative of diminishing liberties' (1), which is the consequence of two distinct but competing tendencies. The 'revolution' enacted by Henry VIII imposed a homogeneity on jurisdiction, religious practice and political life that expressed itself in ideals of unity and novelty – values that were readily internalized in forms of literary expression. Prior to this, the motive force of cultural life, which is to say the dominant feature in literary practice, was reform. Simpson is thus standing on their heads two *idées reçues*: first, that late medieval English literature is essentially static in its modes, genres and ideologies; second, that the sixteenth century is a moment of cultural liberation. Simpson admits that other explanatory frameworks are possible, notably one that sees the shift from manuscript to print as the means whereby literature and language were centralized, but his main concern is to demonstrate the validity of his thesis in relation to a number of key modes and themes.

For instance, in the case of 'the comic' (the subject of an entire chapter), Simpson considers the literary expression of two ethical systems. One is limited to the chivalric class and is providential (an underlying patterning of fate ensures that knights win through by virtue of their status); the other is not limited to any class, and is prudential, one that 'can be practised by anyone with the wit to perceive possible futures' (257). Romance – which is comic in the sense that many romance narratives have happy endings – belongs predominantly to the first system, and yet romance often contains a critique of that system or, as Simpson might say, the means of its own reform. This view runs counter to that of sixteenth-century commentators, who saw the reform of chivalry, from brutal practice to civilizing influence, as an achievement of their own day. In fact, medieval romances habitually bring into question and test the very principles on which their protagonists operate – if only to reassert the validity of those principles. They expose honour to shame, and demonstrate that individual identity depends upon affiliation with a larger social group, and indeed with that group's interactions with other social forces. Repeatedly, those other forces are mercantile and female, and in this lies the key to understanding the ways in which medieval romance tends to urge a re-examination of chivalry: it speaks to the women and merchants – excluded as they were from chivalric status – precisely because they were the target audiences of many of the more popular Middle English romances. Chaucer, for his part, mounted his own critique of romance. For example, he juxtaposed it with fabliau – a type of tale in which the victor is the most prudential person, that is, the most adept manipulator of a given situation. But when Caxton edited Sir Thomas Malory's romances for printing as the *Morte Darthur* (1485), his changes were 'in keeping with the Tudor centralization of chivalry' (292).

Both Wallace and Simpson have received their shares of plaudits and brickbats. Wallace has been thought too pluralist in his willingness to entertain a wide spectrum of competing narratives that might explain the development of late medieval English literature, with the result that his 'history' is fragmented and incoherent.[2] Simpson, by contrast, is open to the charge of being reductive, of subsuming the variety of late medieval writing and the different developmental dynamics of its genres in a single explanatory thesis. The effect can be a distortion or misrepresentations of certain kinds of development in order to save the appearances of the broader narrative.[3] The present book does not attempt a general intervention in either side of the debate, although its orientation is more towards Wallace than Simpson. However, some individual contributors do take positions in relation to one or the other approach, and since both histories are important and durable points of reference, it has been appropriate to take due account of them here.

The overall concept of the present volume, and the topics identified for most of its chapters, was the work of its begetter, Nicholas Havely. I am indebted to him for devising a scheme that has proved resilient but flexible. It has undergone some revision as chapters have been commissioned, and a few new topics have been added. In particular, the organization of the contributions is now quite different from that originally envisaged. The structure is that of a funnel. The book begins with sections that have the broadest circumference, and continues with others that have gradually diminishing frames of reference. The subject matter narrows until the final, and longest, section, deals at length with individual texts. But even a chapter offering the widest possible conspectus brings its ideas to bear on specific literary examples. Conversely, discussion of individual works frequently raises themes that are considered more fully in earlier contributions. The chapters are thus interactive and at the end of each the reader is directed to others that deal with related topics. Each contributor is a specialist in his or her field, and has been encouraged to write in an authoritative but accessible way that will set the reader thinking, open up horizons of meaning, and provide models of interpretative technique. The result is a compendious volume, full of original material and dependable judgements, that will enliven the study, discussion and research of late medieval English literature for many years to come.

NOTES

1   Stephen G. Nicholls, 'Writing the New Middle Ages', *PMLA* 120 (2005), 422–41.

2   See John Burrow's review in *Speculum* 76 (2001), 243–5 and the colloquium in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 23 (2001), 471–519, with contributions by Christine Chism, Theresa Coletti, Fiona Somerset, Sarah Stanbury, Anne Savage and David Wallace.

3   David Aers and Sarah Beckwith (eds), 'Reform and Cultural Revolution: Writing English Literary History, 1350–1547', special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35 (2005), 3–119, with contributions by David Wallace, Derek Pearsall, Richard K. Emmerson, Bruce Holsinger, Thomas Betteridge and James Simpson.

PART I
Overviews

1
Critical Approaches

David Raybin

Critical theory at the beginning of the twenty-first century has refocused the historicizing of late medieval English literature and culture. A new wave of manuscript studies is bringing deeper understanding of the surviving physical evidence, of early book culture, of reception, and of the trilingual character of late medieval English literature. Feminist analysis and gender-based studies continue to expand our sense of the scope of the history available to be examined. Religious studies, such as those of the Lollard movement or the cultures of orthodoxy and dissent, are refining our understanding of the age's spiritual climate. The scholarship of intertextuality – especially of how earlier writers influenced Chaucer and his contemporaries, and of how Chaucer and Langland influenced fifteenth-century authors – has articulated important continuities between the periods now labelled *medieval* and *early modern*. Studies of popular culture interrogate the historical basis of legend. And philologists old and new are allowing us to see how verbal play and nuance may reveal a writer's stance on pivotal spiritual and political debates. In studies of the past decade, a few emphases are prominent: *Multilingualism and Vernacularity* – what does it mean that writers choose to write in English instead of (or along with) courtly French and learned Latin, and how far may one distinguish London English from concurrent dialects? *Englishness* – what is the new 'England' that writers define in terms of language and geography? *Literary and Social Affinities* – with what circles do writers associate and how do audience concerns create meaning? *Violence and the Other* – against what cultures, classes, beliefs and behaviours do medieval English writers define themselves, and why does violence figure so prominently in this definition through difference? Such strategies as Marxist criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, and deconstruction continue to be practised, but to a large extent their values have been assimilated into the general critical vocabulary.

By the phrase *critical theory* I mean here not only the abstract discourse that scholars use to describe their strategies, but more importantly the *practice* that informs the discipline and the studies to which I will refer. Paul Strohm distinguishes 'engaged or "practical" theory' from its 'hypothetical opposite – "pure" theory, uncorrected or

unchastened by sustained contact with a particular text' (Strohm 2000: xi). Abstract theorists have opened exciting avenues for textual analysis, providing common vocabularies for such analysis. However, in the context of the present volume, which is defined by its concern for the 'particular text', my focus will be less on how writers define their methods than on their practical performance of those methods.

Anthologies

The ways in which editors construct anthologies provide a good baseline for understanding how theoretical reorientations shift our perspectives on earlier texts. The choices made by the anthologists tell large groups of people what they should read, and although editors do not always argue overtly for their choices, a theoretical stance is usually implicit in the selections. Derek Pearsall explains that a comprehensive anthology must include 'larger samples of what is best [in the writing of a period] and smaller samples of what is more representative' and that for reader as well as anthologist 'the two criteria are constantly in operational conflict and in question' (Pearsall 1999: xv). I will look at how three anthologies resolve the conflict.

The most widely read anthology, the book that introduces most North American students to English medieval literature, is the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, now in its seventh edition.[1] The selections representing 'Middle English Literature in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries' are: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; a hefty chunk of Geoffrey Chaucer (including the General Prologue and four tales); some *Piers Plowman*; selections from Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Thomas Malory and Robert Henryson; three plays; and eleven anonymous lyrics. Although *Norton* is noted for its extensive historical introductions, the texts themselves exhibit a focus on the poetry traditionally rated 'best', along with a sampling of prose, drama, and writings by women. The critical judgement implicit in the *Norton Anthology* asserts that while texts by women must be acknowledged, relatively little else has changed in what we ought to read.

The *Longman Anthology of British Literature*, currently in its second edition, is *Norton*'s chief competitor.[2] Its 'The Middle Ages' section includes everything in *Norton* save *Everyman* and *Noah* (for which *Mankind* and the York *Crucifixion* are substituted) with quite a few additions. Some additions amplify the *Norton* offerings: more Chaucer and a larger sampling of *Piers Plowman*, Julian and Kempe. Other additions insert new perspectives: the political dimension of non-literary works on the Rising of 1381 and 'vernacular religion and repression'; the multicultural voices in insular works from Scotland and Wales; a deepened recognition of fifteenth-century culture as reflected in selections from John Lydgate and Christine de Pizan. Collectively, the additions enact an ambivalent editorial reflection upon the traditional canon. The inclusion of Welsh works (in translation), poetry in Middle Scots, and texts of English political opposition effectively expands the definition of what represents *British* literature and includes more of 'what is more representative', while the expansion of the Chaucer offerings indicates