PART I
Overviews

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1
Critical Approaches

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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

an editorial commitment to featuring Chaucer as the dominant writer of the age. Notably, neither the *Longman* nor the *Norton* anthology includes either *Pearl* or Chaucer's most spiritual poetry (Man of Law's Tale, Clerk's Tale, Prioress's Tale, Second Nun's Tale). When it comes to what we are supposed to read, we are clearly to favour texts representing forces of religious dissent or secular humour over texts representing spiritual practices we might view as too traditionally medieval.

A more substantial rethinking of what we should read is offered in Derek Pearsall's *Chaucer to Spenser: An Anthology of Writings in English 1375–1575*. The editor's theoretical stance is articulated in two decisions. First, the volume's scope, manifested in its title, restructures a student's encounter with Chaucer by asserting a continuity between fourteenth- and sixteenth-century English literature. Second, the volume's individual selections reflect a theory of inclusiveness that juxtaposes aesthetically significant literary texts with texts having less literary appeal but which provide a historicized context for reading.

Pearsall seeks to manifest the 'common cultural tradition' that binds together the *Parliament of Fowls* and the *Shepherd's Calendar* because he fears that Chaucer, 'Taught so frequently now as the sole representative of English writing before Shakespeare . . . is in danger of being read and learnt about in a vacuum' (Pearsall 1999: xv). Many proponents of the term *early modern* assume that a vast wasteland separates Tudor literature, appreciated as introducing the modern world, and medieval literature, disparaged as an immature other that briefly flourished with Chaucer. In highlighting fifteenth-century traditions that both reflect the rich heritage of Chaucer and his contemporaries and anticipate the accomplishment of Spenser and his, Pearsall contests the notion of rupture: 'every text looks both backward and forward', with continuities being 'as well worth stressing as changes' (Pearsall 1999: xv–xvi). His selections simultaneously assert the excellence of Chaucer and his contemporaries (the large space given to Chaucer underpins the volume), direct a reader to appreciate the merits of a wide range of fifteenth-century writers, and allow one to see the themes and generic choices linking many sixteenth-century writers to their predecessors. The cumulative effect of the volume is to present a few writers (Chaucer and eight others) as principal conversants in a broader literary discussion that belies the notion of a discontinuous or valueless fifteenth century.

The Triumph of History

In the same year (1999) that *Chaucer to Spenser* challenged the *Norton* idea of what we should read, the creators of the massive *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, privileging its title's 'history' over its 'literature', took the complementary step of promoting a historicism oriented towards anthropology as *the* proper method for selecting and reading texts, which are to be chosen on criteria other than simple literary merit. Proselytizers for a particular theoretical perspective often argue the whys of their

choices. Editor David Wallace and his collaborators contend that history is necessary to literary understanding and, further, that literary texts are neither more valuable than, nor easily distinguishable from, other texts. To appreciate Wallace's perspective, one may turn to a collection of essays entitled *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-century England* that he edited with historian Barbara A. Hanawalt. In their introduction, the editors boast of how combining new subjects of study with improved theoretical constructs has made fifteenth-century English studies 'one of the most dynamic growth areas in both literary and historical scholarship':

> This may be, in part, because the fourteenth century has been overworked, but it may also be that medievalists, now somewhat more theory-literate, are better equipped to address the challenges of this difficult period. The extraordinary range of subject matters in this volume . . . attests to the emergence of a new fifteenth-century England. The Wars of the Roses, Caxton and Malory – subjects that loom large in traditional accounts of the period – play a negligible role in this volume. Rather, the essayists direct our attention to the smaller, local dramas that occupied many and various segments of the population. (Hanawalt and Wallace 1996: x)

Indeed, although the majority of the contributors to *Bodies and Disciplines* are affiliated with programmes in English literary studies, the essays focus primarily on facets of local, institutional and corporeal history. Civil and ecclesiastical court records, guild ordinances and household books are brought to bear upon both written and enacted texts as the authors demonstrate how 'the freedoms and constraints endured and enjoyed by different bodies, or the same body at different moments', may be 'considered as part of greater social strategies' (xi). The fifteenth century becomes an exciting area for literary study precisely because its written texts, presumed to lack the aesthetic qualities offered by Chaucer or the *Gawain* poet, lend themselves to the kinds of socio-cultural analysis favoured by new historicism.

The attitude that situates literature as adjunct to history permeates the interpretation of English medieval literary history promulgated in the *Cambridge History*. Literary subjects that have traditionally formed the core of such a history receive limited attention, while subjects more congenial to non-literary historical analysis are accentuated. The titles of the volume's large sections and their chapters offer a succinct representation of Wallace's theoretical design. *Writing in the British Isles* includes chapters entitled 'Writing in Wales', 'Writing in Ireland', 'Writing in Scotland, 1058–1560', 'Writing history in England' and 'London texts and literate practice', effectively ignoring the existence of English-language literary texts. *Institutional Productions* includes chapters on 'Monastic productions', 'The friars and medieval English literature', 'Classroom and confession', '*Vox populi* and the literature of 1381' and 'Englishing the Bible, 1066–1549'. An interest in the collective will thus obscures questions of aesthetics and design posed by single authorship. The chapters in *After the Black Death*, the literary heart of the volume, acknowledge individual authorship but reject the traditional notion of a Ricardian literary renaissance centred upon three magnificent poets. Indeed, the *Pearl*-

poet is not afforded a chapter and receives mention only in passing.[3] The volume's final section, *Before the Reformation*, consists of chapters that highlight the institutional conflicts that opposed traditional and dissident religion and politics. Where the older model of literary history, like the standard anthology, prizes aesthetically or technically admirable literary texts, the *Cambridge History* privileges social structures, events and themes.

It is evident that *Chaucer to Spenser* and the *Cambridge History* are founded upon distinct theoretical stances: Pearsall champions a *literary* history that documents the ebb and flow of creative achievement linking greater and lesser Ricardian, fifteenth-century and Tudor poets; Wallace favours a *cultural* history that contextualizes the texts – all texts with non-literary ones often privileged – produced by medieval and Tudor writers as reflections of their conflicted societies. This gap notwithstanding, the volumes share a perspective that defines almost all substantial studies of medieval literature published in the last decade. Whether a scholar looks at written texts or enacted texts, whether her interests lie in politics or poetry, drama or faith, whether he is intrigued by a text's ideology or enthused by its aesthetic, the critic's principal task is to enhance scholarly understanding of the relationship of the text to the ever more broadly conceived historical context in which it appeared. In the remainder of this chapter I will discuss some of the areas in which practical theorists address this hunger to historicize and some of the ways in which their efforts have advanced understanding of the late Middle Ages in England.

Multilingualism and Vernacularity

The circumstances of late medieval England have attracted exciting new thinking about how, in practice, languages interact and evolve, and how, in consequence, one properly approaches texts whose linguistic identity is either mixed or insecure.[4] The interest may relate to the fact that at the beginning of the twenty-first century such conditions are current; as Tony Hunt notes in comparing contemporary to medieval culture, 'outside a few western societies with a strong sense of language identity and near-universal literacy, conditions which obviously did not obtain in medieval Britain, *multi*lingualism is the norm' (in Trotter 2000: 131). To think seriously about the multilingual character of late medieval Britain poses a vigorous challenge to the age-old assumption that the way linguistic things worked out was inevitable. The traditional view is that English triumphed easily and necessarily over French and Latin to become the dominant language of both literature and common speech, with Chaucer playing an important role in the literary arena. Arrests to this view have emerged in three main areas. First, the records show that the ascendancy of English as the language of learned and aristocratic discourse came late, while French and Latin were used widely throughout the fourteenth century and well into the fifteenth. Second, English was itself a much less homogeneous language than the standard explanation assumes, as myriad regional dialects joined with Welsh and Middle Scots to create a linguistic map in which London's Middle

English was one of many coexisting forms. The appearance in 1986 of *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (ed. A. McIntosh, M. L. Samuels and M. Benskin, 4 vols. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press) has enabled the identification of these regional English dialects and the better pinpointing of textual and scribal provenance. Third, the swelling of Chaucer's English vocabulary reflects the way language generally expanded in his era. Christopher Cannon has shown that Chaucer introduced new words at a steady pace throughout his literary career, using many of them only once, and that Chaucer's behaviour in this regard was both typical of his literary-minded predecessors and contemporaries and natural in a trilingual society (Cannon 1998: 90, 129–30).

These challenges to imagining an English-language Middle Ages correlate with a broad range of theoretical advances. Reception studies demand that texts be examined in the context of their production, distribution and audience. Marxist studies resist the notion that an individual can institute broad change. New historical studies privilege cultural studies over the study of individual texts, insist that we interrogate the bases of our cultural assumptions, and distinguish our standards from those of a culture under examination. Postcolonial studies (one of the least developed and most promising areas of study)[5] expose the practice of equating a hegemonic cultural group with the local culture that it dominates. As D. A. Trotter says,

> The study of the linguistic situation of medieval Britain . . . requires . . . a determined refusal to hide behind the artificial barriers of either allegedly separate languages, or (perhaps above all) conveniently separated disciplines, each hermetically sealed against the dangers of contamination from adjacent fields of enquiry, and each buttressed by its own traditions or (less charitably) insulated by its own uncritical and self-preserving conceptions. (Trotter 2000: 1)

A happy result of this problematic is that large-scale collaborative projects have been created to rethink why multilingualism matters. Trotter's *Multilingualism in Later Medieval Britain* unites linguists from six nations for a dialogue on (1) multilingual *contact* (the environments in which English interacted with Welsh, Latin and Anglo-Norman); (2) linguistic *mixing* – that is, the functionality of macaronic texts in the business world, the rules governing intratextual code-switching, and the appropriation of phrasal verb structures in literary and non-literary texts; and (3) the general permeability of language use in what was a thoroughly multilingual culture. This area of newly theorized research is thus conceived in a vein similar to the *Cambridge History*, where the results combine the work of specialists not only in the languages of England – Old English, Middle English, Latin and Anglo-Norman – but also in those of Wales, Ireland and Scotland.

Coming to recognize the multilingual character of medieval English culture has also enabled manuscript studies to flourish. Another example of collaborative research exists in an international project that exemplifies directions in which such studies are moving. London, British Library MS Harley 2253 has long been valued for the secular and political lyrics that mark it as possibly 'the most important single MS of Middle English poetry'.[6] Had this unique manuscript not survived, scholars might reasonably surmise

that few lyrics on subjects other than religion were composed in Middle English prior to Chaucer. G. L. Brook's edition of *The Harley Lyrics* (1948; 3rd edn 1964) clusters the more famous poems into a manageable volume, but by isolating the lyrics from their manuscript context, Brook obscured the fact that 'In manuscript the English poems are *not* gathered in one place: they appear intermittently across seventy pages, and mixed in with them are forty-odd items' (Fein 2000: 5). The codex's highly varied items are written in Middle English, Latin and Anglo-Norman, so that to study the Middle English lyrics in the context of their presentation (determined by the principal scribe's selections and organizational choices) and probable reception requires thinking, like the scribe, trilingually. Susanna Fein's *Studies in the Harley Manuscript* is a collection of sixteen specialist essays that examine this manuscript in terms of its scribes, contents, social contexts and languages. Theories informing projects like this one base themselves on the evidence of the book as a unique archaeological object with verbal content, created at a precise point in time for a specific purpose and a specific audience. As is being increasingly recognized, work on individual manuscripts, on the codicological activity of specific regions or by specific persons, on the identities of readers, patrons and scribes, and on networks of transmission and reception, all promise to reveal larger historical patterns by which we may restructure our knowledge. As it is almost always the case that medieval English books hold texts in more than one language (and even when they don't we may wonder why), what they may tell us about multilingual contact remains a field of great current interest.

Englishness

If late medieval English was not simply the language created and used by Chaucer and the Chancery scribes, and if the largest of the British isles was a space where French and Latin mixed with the various native dialects, then what does 'England' mean, and what distinguishes a literature as 'English'?[7] A number of recent books, responding to various theoretical pressures, have examined different aspects of this subject. Helen Cooney opens her collection, *Nation, Court and Culture*, with a chapter in which Pearsall rejects the idea of a distinctly English late medieval consciousness and thus sets a standard against which the arguments for 'Englishness' in the remainder of the volume may be measured. Pearsall's argument is that, notwithstanding Chaucer's famous evocation of 'Engelond' in the opening of the *Canterbury Tales*, neither he nor his contemporaries nor his fifteenth-century successors thought of England as a definable insular nation or of 'Englishness' as a distinguishing natural consciousness. To the contrary, Chaucer, John Gower, William Langland, the *Gawain* poet, Lydgate, Thomas Hoccleve, Malory, William Caxton, John Shirley and their aristocratic and royal patrons all 'were fluent in French and steeped in French culture'; and even as Henry V, the most strenuous advocate for the use of English, was writing in this language 'to announce the victory at Agincourt' to 'the mayor and aldermen of London', he was 'writing in French to his brothers' (in Cooney 2001: 22, 19).

The remainder of *Nation, Court and Culture* responds, obliquely, to Pearsall's argument. Thinking in terms of 'geopolitical theory', John Scattergood finds in the nationalistic poem 'The Libelle of Englyshe Polycye' a 'concern with borders and their preservation' that is 'based on a knowledgeable analysis of European economics and trade' and contemplates a common Anglo-Irish interest (in Cooney 2001: 49, 44–5). Exploring ideas of nationhood in manuscript collections from across the fifteenth century, Phillipa Hardman shows movement from a deep concern with Englishness to an 'uncomplicated, even sentimental sense of England signal[ling] that among the community of readers . . . the anxieties of the previous hundred years were felt to be laid to rest' (in Cooney 2001: 69). Other contributors get at the idea of fifteenth-century Englishness by addressing its apprehensions in terms of the particular historical circumstances in which literature was produced. Whether one wrote political verse for the Lancastrian court or composed in such less public genres as *dit amoureux*, complaint, allegory and carol, we find what Cooney categorizes as 'writers clinging anxiously and with some tenacity to the old certitudes and conventions surrounding the concepts of nation and court' (2001: 14). Over the course of the century English writers might have grown more secure in their national identity, but they remained insular in temperament.

Patricia Clare Ingham, in her *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain*, uses psychoanalysis to query the notion of 'Englishness'. Focusing on the particular example of the 'diametrically opposed . . . political agendas' that informed medieval British responses to the Arthur legend, Ingham shows that 'the meaning of British sovereignty in Arthur's story . . . was contested throughout England, Wales and Scotland from Monmouth's time well into the late medieval period' (Ingham 2001: 23). The prophetic character of Arthur's projected return was employed as a symbol of British sovereignty by such diverse figures as Richard II, using his Welsh connections to defend his throne, Henry Tudor, exploiting Welsh ties as he raised the banner of Arthur against Richard III at Bosworth, and Owain Glyndwr, leading a messianic Welsh rebellion against Henry IV. In literature, Arthurian hopes and anxieties fed into the genre of romance as it developed in England and Wales in books as varied in their nationalist sensibilities as *The Red Book of Hergest*, the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Ingham's psychoanalytic approach reminds us of the inseparability of fear and desire and demonstrates how unfeasible it is to contemplate a uniform notion of 'Englishness'.

Yet as interpreters of an earlier culture we want spatial-temporal unities and historical categories we can grasp. The editors of *Essays on Ricardian Literature in Honour of J. A. Burrow* accept their honoree's notion of a distinct Ricardian literature even as they recognize the limitations of studying literature as a distinct discipline and urge us to expand our horizon. In the book's opening essay A. C. Spearing argues that Ricardian poetry displays no 'unifying vision' and that the works even of Chaucer, Langland and Gower 'record a struggle to find ways of saying things for which their culture provided no ready formulations or artistic forms' (in Minnis, Morse and Turville-Petre 1997: 22). The book's editors emphasize the incongruity of seeking unity in individual voices by

juxtaposing more formalist examinations of prominent individual writers with more generalizing chapters that encourage us to think about the kinds of values and cultural conditions that define a common literary or historical moment. Charlotte Morse's closing essay explores the convoluted history of critical response to Burrow's positing a distinct Ricardian poetry comparable to Elizabethan or Romantic poetry, suggesting that medievalists now adopt the term *Ricardian studies*, which she sees as analogous to the popular locution *medieval studies* in that it rejects the ahistorical privileging of a single voice found in a phrase like *the age of Chaucer* in favour of the kind of current cross-disciplinary cultural exploration that acknowledges multiple and conflicting voices. Morse's conclusion crystallizes the stakes involved in medievalists' embracing inclusive theoretical constructs in our exploration of 'Englishness':

> Broadening Burrow's perspective to Ricardian studies, embracing the issues he addressed, and expanding beyond them gives us the flexibility to keep the aesthetic, rhetorical, political, ethical, spiritual and intellectual dimensions of Ricardian writing alive in and to the culture we inhabit. (In Minnis, Morse and Turville-Petre 1997: 344)

Reception, Patronage, Literary and Social Affinities

Who were the people who wrote literary texts in medieval England? What did they read? With whom did they associate? Who were their readers and how did their response differ from ours? Who were their patrons? For a few late medieval writers we can find substantive answers to these questions, but for many of their contemporaries the questions can be answered only in small part, and sometimes hardly at all. Literary historians therefore are devising new critical strategies to get at answers, so much so that the kind of localization of literary production imagined in these questions underlies much of the historicizing quest that marks current medieval literary study.

The publication in 1989 of Paul Strohm's *Social Chaucer* encouraged medievalists to return to thinking about literature in terms of an author's local associations. This idea is not new, but in drawing a picture of what he calls 'the king's affinity' Strohm advances the Marxist/historicist project of interrogating literary production and reception in the context not only of the vertical structures of patronage, but also the lateral structures uniting people in comparable social circumstances. More recently, Strohm has pursued a series of studies that use the symbolism of particular historical events as a springboard for exposing hidden structures and conflicts in the larger culture. In *Hochon's Arrow* he interrogates the unfulfilled threat made by a servant of the magnate Thomas Austin to shoot Mayor Nicholas Brembre's associate Hugh Fastolf, and unveils the factional politics that were lived daily by the London citizenry in the 1380s. In *England's Empty Throne* (1998) he examines official accounts of the unprecedented burning for heresy of William Sautre in 1401 and argues that the Lancastrians used such relatively insignificant threats as those posed by Lollardy to create a language that justified their usurpation and continuing occupation of the throne. As these examples suggest, Strohm is as

much interested in how observers read the events as in the events themselves, and it is reflective of his evolving interest in historical contingency that in his recent books the writings of chroniclers have largely displaced literary texts.[8]

Strohm is more extreme in his theoretical commitment to history as the primary object of study than are most literary scholars, but even when answers to the questions of literary association appear in more familiar guises, a historicist bent is rarely absent. Thus when Christine Chism treats 'the revival of the dead and the past' in eight standard alliterative works, she predicates her analysis on the poets' common interest in the 'embodied and spectacular performance of history'. Chism acknowledges the importance of such literary qualities as metre, genre and voice, but her book's announced theoretical agenda is unabashedly cultural and historical: 'these poems (1) investigate the historical antecedents of medieval structures; (2) dramatize the questioning of cultural centers from outsider (or provincial) perspectives; and (3) centralize the historical contingencies of a world in flux rather than aiming primarily at more transcendent concerns with the afterlife' (Chism 2002: 1–2). Starting from a perspective that locates culture in historical event rather than in aesthetic accomplishment, she finds historical testimony even in works belonging to the *Pearl*-tradition of meditative devotion.

Locating culture in the literate audience of fifteenth-century writers who canonized Chaucer as the father of English poetry, Seth Lerer's *Chaucer and his Readers* embraces a historicism that proclaims that 'the aim of literary studies should be, not the interpretation of individual texts, but the study of the conventions of interpretation, and thus of the production and reception of texts' (Lerer 1993: 8, quoting Victoria Kahn). Dismissing the value of the singular literary endeavour as a cultural indicator, Lerer challenges modern readers to embrace textual variation and thereby to appreciate textual instability or *mouvance* as a distinguishing characteristic of literary production and reception in a manuscript culture. All Chaucer manuscripts presumably date to the fifteenth century or later. These manuscripts, which inscribe medieval response, show that Chaucer was read minutely, personally, and with a deep respect for what later writers saw as his definition of poetic practice. The fifteenth-century Chaucerians' imitation of and self-imposed subjection to the master's method, authority and immediate relevance thus illuminate the cultural significance of Chaucerian practice in ways that an untheorized devotion to a putatively recuperable fourteenth-century Chaucerian text makes obscure.

Religion

No community was more important to a writer in our period than that which nurtured one's belief. Three principal directions, based on the monumental work of scholars in the 1980s and early 1990s, have competed to redirect study of late medieval religion. Eamon Duffy, focusing on the institutionalized operation of faith, has assembled a compendium of information on traditional practices. His position is that we should

seek to understand how most people thought and behaved. Anne Hudson and Margaret Aston, fastening upon oppositional beliefs, have amassed voluminous documentation of Lollard practices. Their position is that by focusing on dissident thought and behaviour, we can come to understand the tensions affecting both dominant and resistant belief. Carolyn Walker Bynum, directing attention to women religious, has documented the particularities of female spiritual practice. Her premise is that patriarchal documentation simultaneously appropriates and marginalizes the affective spirituality practised by large numbers of women and many men.[9] Taken together, the volumes produced by these archival scholars have offered medievalists much information upon and against which to construct theoretically informed analyses that spotlight the political character of late medieval spiritual practice. Curiously, it is Duffy's work that has generated the least direct interest, perhaps reflecting the scholarly tendency to be more interested in opposition than in dominant practice.

David Aers and Lynn Staley view spiritual discourse as inherently political. In their jointly authored *The Powers of the Holy* they postulate that in the closing years of the fourteenth century, before Bishop Arundel joined with the newly triumphant Lancastrian monarchs to enforce political and religious orthodoxy, writers who resisted a fairly mild communal pressure to conform 'were able to express divergent views and explore issues relating to both power and authority'. In particular, Langland, Julian of Norwich and Chaucer used the relative freedom afforded to literary discourse to challenge spiritual and political orthodoxy in ways that reflect, more or less cautiously, sympathy to Wycliffite concerns. Aers claims that Langland and Julian addressed the fractious issue of the 'humanity of Christ' by using images that privilege dissent, while Staley contends that Chaucer and Julian used the language of devotion to advance perspectives that covertly challenged the 'dominant ecclesiastical and political institutions' on whose good will and support they ostensibly depended. Through dextrous use of the language and imagery of gender, the three writers 'signal their awareness – inevitably political – that the call to Christ is a call to consciousness' (Aers and Staley 1996: 261–3). Aers and Staley's argument depends on a recognition of how politically charged are the intertwined languages of orthodoxy and dissent on the one hand, and the intertwined moods and subjects of female 'affective' piety and male 'analytic' piety on the other.

Sarah Beckwith's *Signifying God* similarly asserts the interconnectedness of the spiritual and the political as figured in the dissent-riddled symbolism of the York Corpus Christi plays. These popular spectacles incorporated performers and audience in an inherently politicized response to orthodox authority: performing the sacred in a public space necessarily obscured the boundaries between sanctified and profane spaces both symbolic and physical. As Beckwith puts it, 'When Corpus Christi, the little host under clerical jurisdiction and subject to strict ritual control and construction, is extended into the drama of the town, it risks its own meanings, finding them difficult to guarantee' (Beckwith 2001: 47). To dramatize the suffering of Christ was to appropriate a theological discourse that questioned the substantive nature of the sacrament. The fact that the corporate community of York manufacturers and labourers living

in the very seat of English ecclesiastical authority involved itself in this vital debate as a municipally sanctioned spiritual practice requires us to read the York plays as political statement.

Violence and the Other

An idea shared by almost all the scholars I have mentioned is that history lies on the margins. It is in the victims, the resistant ones, and the individuals and groups subjected to authoritarian discipline, that a culture's desires are articulated, even though their voices are often muted or denied the attribution of eloquence afforded the sanctioned literati. The study of late medieval literature, so long focused on retrieving the polished diction of the canonical greats, has moved, in search of their history, to the edges, both geographically to Wales, Scotland, Ireland and the north of England, and textually to the manuscripts, chronicles and ecclesiastical and governmental documents that record less exquisite aesthetic moments. I will close this digest by addressing the theory governing approaches to two current issues at the edge of traditional literary work: violence (which is inextricably associated with power) and the Other, as psychoanalysts term the ego's apprehension of difference from itself.

The violence that maintained the social order is frequent in medieval texts, sometimes overt, sometimes simply threatened. Corinne Saunders's *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* stands at what the author calls 'the convergence of two streams of scholarly discourse', the one situating itself at the critical distance of 'a historian of *mentalités*' seeking to inscribe acts of rape and abduction in the specific 'cultural, literary, and imaginative contexts' of medieval England; the other defining itself in the strict terms of current gender theory, responding to rape as the act that 'epitomizes all that is most fundamental and offensive in the power relationships of the sexes, in the social construction of gender differences, in the ferocious ideologies of hegemony and power' (Saunders 2001: 1–2). The former approach acknowledges culture difference; the latter insists on the primacy of essentialist values. As a literary historian focusing on the denotation of a word, *raptus*, Saunders places her study primarily in the *mentalités* camp, but as a modern feminist scholar, a woman reading and responding to a language enunciated almost entirely by men, she brings to the surface the horror embedded in unemotional male diction. Sexual violence is thus historicized as part of the cultural legacy of patriarchy.

Violence often becomes a response to what is perceived as Other, that is, what is peculiar, disturbing, resistant, transgressive, or foreign. Because these notions are personal, critical foci vary according to what it is about ourselves we wish to uncover in the past. Most recently, scholarly interest has fastened upon women and men who resisted the heterosexual norm: elective virgins and homosexuals.[10] For example, Sarah Salih offers an illuminating discussion of gender in regard to the distinctly medieval professions of virginity. Drawing upon Bynum's assertion that medieval religious women 'strove not to eradicate body but to merge their own humiliating and painful flesh with

that flesh whose agony, espoused by choice, was salvation', Salih queries whether 'fleshly abjection is the only position medieval women can adopt'. Rather than assuming a gender-specific bodily sameness in all those genitally female, she insists on the distinctiveness of virginity from womanliness, contending that 'medieval virgins and medieval women . . . have different experiences of the body', that virginity may be considered 'a deployment, not a denial, of the body', and that 'virginity is not a denial or rejection of sexuality, but itself a sexuality . . . a culturally specific organization of desires' (Salih 2001: 5–10).

While notions of virginity underline the alterity of medieval experience, Robin Hood embodies the familiar stuff of legend, the classic insider turned outsider to turn hierarchy upside-down and serve the common good. In this he stands for much of what we know of the popular folk culture of late medieval England. But it is the subtitle of Thomas Hahn's collection, *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, that indicates the direction taken by this look at popular culture.[11] A Bakhtinian delight in transgression explains the celebrity of the hero whose adventures have been reprised for upwards of eight centuries, and as we look with historicist eyes at the bloody justice meted out by and against Robin and his band we find a world that is both distinctly medieval and characteristically colonial. The outlaw inhabits the native forest, interacts with the foreign ruler and his surrogates in violent encounters, and asserts popular folk justice as being morally superior to the legal machinations of sheriff and court. Robin Hood himself exists powerfully in the oral consciousness (people and places are named after him), figures strongly in the literary tradition, and appears fleetingly in local records as a model of the renegade. His presence asserts popular English values in the face of externally imposed royal (hence French) and clerical (hence Latin) cultural hegemony.

The political response to resistance is to institutionalize behaviour. In a study of the evolution of medieval attitudes towards law, Richard Firth Green documents how the word *trouthe*, which once embodied the personal pledge, was transformed into an indicator of judicial practice, and how the violence that initially enforced the private agreement came to be reserved to the institutions of church and state. *Trouthe* appears frequently in both the public sphere, where it features in the development of contractual law, and the literary sphere, where notions of obligation, fidelity, honour, righteousness and factuality play a vital role. Green cites contemporary records in Latin and French that contextualize his reading of Middle English usage, examines a wealth of particular cases that make intelligible larger cultural norms, considers the developing relationship between folk law, the king's law and ecclesiastical law as they reflect the differing oral/popular and scribal/institutional understandings of *trouthe*, shows how similar to the medieval conflict is the clash between traditional law and colonial law depicted in late twentieth-century Nigerian literature, and, in all, demonstrates how much power – sometimes raw, sometimes more controlled – was invested in the definition and enactment of a word. Although its philological subject might seem conservative, this compendium offers a vivid demonstration of how the contributions of theorists have transformed the discipline of medieval studies.

Conclusion

Medievalists are a practical lot, and this has made some of us resistant to theory. Why get caught up in the latest fad or the newest jargon when there are so many facts out there to deal with? Interrogating what Strohm calls 'engaged theory' provides what I think is a practical answer to why theory must matter to us. Medieval literary studies have always been interdisciplinary. Even when formalist new criticism ruled the theoretical roost or structuralism ran wild, medievalists have treated texts as verbal artefacts to be considered in the context of other cultural survivals of their time and space. What distinguishes the past few years is that we bring to our texts increasingly sophisticated questions about the cultural circumstances of textual production. We see a poem in a manuscript and realize how much our understanding of that poem depends upon our understanding of the manuscript. We see a literary canon and realize how much our understanding depends upon our understanding of the cultures in which the constituent elements of that canon were produced, received, and identified as worth studying. We still occasionally gain new material knowledge: recovered documents, information about scribes, details about the conditions of medieval life. But much of what we have come to understand about our texts comes from the new questions that critical theorists have enabled us to ask. We understand more about medieval attitudes towards gender and sexuality, power and violence, materiality and spirituality because theorists have taught us that these are subjects worthy of inquiry.

See also: 2 English Society in the Later Middle Ages, 3 Religious Authority and Dissent, 4 City and Country, Wealth and Labour, 6 Manuscripts and Readers, 7 From Manuscript to Modern Text, 8 Translation and Society, 9 The Languages of Medieval Britain, 17 Literature and Law, 20 Middle English Romance, 21 Writing Nation, 23 Lyric, 24 Literature of Religious Instruction, 25 Mystical and Devotional Literature, 29 York Mystery Plays, 30 The *Book of Margery Kempe*, 31 Julian of Norwich, 32 *Piers Plowman*, 33 The *Canterbury Tales*, 34 John Gower and John Lydgate, 35 Thomas Hoccleve, 36 The Poetry of Robert Henryson, 37 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 38 Malory's *Morte Darthur*.

Notes

1 M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (eds), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th edn, 2 vols (New York: Norton, 2003).

2 David Damrosch (ed.), *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (New York: Longman, 2003).

3 *Pearl*, and of course the *Pearl*-poet more generally, remain vital to individual scholars; see Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (eds), *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997), and John Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2001).

4 A key resource for study of vernacularity is Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor and Ruth Evans (eds), *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

5 An important book treating postcolonial theory is Cohen 2000.

6 Derek Pearsall, *Old English and Middle English Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 120.

7 A key work on English identity, focusing on the period immediately before that considered in this volume, is Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290–1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

8 Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); *Hochon's Arrow: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation 1399–1422* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Strohm 1998. Strohm decries what he calls 'the preference for culture over history, akin to the current triumph of anthropology over history as the preferred disciplinary companion of literary studies' (Strohm 2000: 149), but his approach is none the less akin to that developed in Geertz's famous account of how the observation of a cockfight served to instruct him in Balinese culture; see Clifford Geertz, 'Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight', *Daedalus* 101 (1972), 1–37; rpt. in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 412–53.

9 Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400–c.1580* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992); Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984); Anne Hudson, *Lollards and Their Books* (London: Hambledon Press, 1985); and Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) and her *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Ritual Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). See also Shannon McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities 1420–1530* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

10 Useful applications of queer theory to medieval studies appear in: Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger (eds), *Queering the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (eds), *Premodern Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Allen J. Frantzen, *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). The seminal historical text is John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994).

11 Due in large measure to the influence of Stephen Knight, Robin Hood studies are in vogue; see Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Stephen Knight (ed.), *Robin Hood: Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999); Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren (eds), *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS, 1997).

References and Further Reading

Aers, David and Staley, Lynn 1996. *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press. A reading of Chaucer, Julian of Norwich and Langland as participants in a debate over the representation of Christ's humanity.

Beckwith, Sarah 2001. *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. An exploration of the spiritual and the political as figured in eucharistic symbolism.

Cannon, Christopher 1998. *The Making of Chaucer's English: A Study of Words.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A history of Chaucer's vocabulary, focusing on his adoption of new words and the provenance of those words.

Chism, Christine 2002. *Alliterative Revivals.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. A

study of the representation of the past in eight Middle English alliterative poems.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome (ed.) 2000. *The Postcolonial Middle Ages.* New York: St Martin's Press. Fifteen essays that interrogate Western assumptions about the significance of time, race, religion, nationality and cultural dominance in medieval studies.

Cooney, Helen (ed.) 2001. *Nation, Court and Culture.* Dublin: Four Courts Press. Eleven essays that reassess fifteenth-century English poetry in relation to court and manuscript cultures.

Fein, Susanna (ed.) 2000. *Studies in the Harley Manuscript.* Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS. Sixteen essays that examine the scribes, contents, social contexts and languages of MS Harley 2253.

Green, Richard Firth 1999. *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. A history of the use of the word *trouthe* in literary and legal documents as it reflects the transition from oral to written culture.

Hahn, Thomas (ed.) 2000. *Robin Hood in Popular Culture.* Cambridge: Brewer. Twenty-three essays exploring the meaning of the Robin Hood legend in medieval and modern popular culture.

Hanawalt, Barbara A. and Wallace, David (eds) 1996. *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-century England.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Twelve essays treating the interplay between literature and history, with a focus on local, institutional and corporeal history.

Ingham, Patricia Clare 2001. *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. An exploration of the agendas that informed medieval response to the Arthur legend from Geoffrey of Monmouth onward.

Lerer, Seth 1993. *Chaucer and his Readers: Imagining the Author in Late Medieval England.* Princeton: Princeton University Press. An exploration of how fifteenth-century readers of Chaucer created his persona as father of English poetry.

Minnis, A. J., Morse, Charlotte C. and Turville-Petre, Thorlac (eds) 1997. *Essays on Ricardian Literature in Honour of J. A. Burrow.* Oxford: Clarendon Press. Fourteen essays on various topics in Ricardian literature, honouring the coiner of the term 'Ricardian Poetry'.

Pearsall, Derek (ed.) 1999. *Chaucer to Spenser: An Anthology of Writings in English, 1375–1575.* Oxford: Blackwell. A survey of writings that articulate the continuity of literary traditions over the period from Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* to Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar.*

Salih, Sarah 2001. *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England.* Cambridge: Brewer. An examination of professions of female virginity as indicative of medieval attitudes towards gender, identity and the body.

Saunders, Corinne 2001. *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England.* Cambridge: D. S. Brewer. An exploration of attitudes about rape and abduction.

Strohm, Paul 1998. *England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399–1422.* New Haven: Yale University Press. An exploration of the complex response of Lancastrian rulers and subjects to the deposition and murder of Richard II.

—— 2000. *Theory and the Premodern Text.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. An effort to expand our understanding of medieval thought by challenging the silences and evasions in medieval texts through a confrontation with theory.

Trotter, D. A. (ed.) 2000. *Multilingualism in Later Medieval Britain.* Cambridge: Brewer. Fourteen essays treating the multilingual character of writing in the British Isles in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Wallace, David (ed.) 1999. *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Thirty-two essays on writing in the British Isles from the Norman Conquest to 1550.