

The Practice and Politics of Reading, 650–1500

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Edited by Daniel Donoghue, James Simpson, Nicholas Watson, and Anna Wilson

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Cover image: Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights Triptych* (detail). Courtesy of Museo Nacional del Prado Difusión, Madrid. Reproduced by permission.

This volume is dedicated to the memory of Caroline L. Bloomfield, 1923–2020

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The conference was funded by the Morton W. Bloomfield Fund in the Department of English at Harvard. The Bloomfield family suffered the loss of Caroline Bloomfield, Morton's widow, in August 2020; this volume is gratefully dedicated to her memory. We thank all those who attended and gave papers at the conference, many of whom have left their mark on this book, as well as those who helped with conference logistics: Rob Brown, Yun Ni, Ahmed Seif, Joseph Shack, and especially Sol Kim Bentley. Thanks are also due to Diana Myers and Mary-Jo Arn for their assistance with copyediting. Particular thanks are due to Rob Brown for taking charge, at very short notice, of the Index.

Abbreviations

ABMA Auctores Britannici Medii Aevi

ACW Ancient Christian Writers
ASPR Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records

AST Anglo-Saxon Texts

BMC XI Catalogue of Books Printed in the XVth Century now in the

British Library, Part XI: England. Edited by Lotte Hellinga.

't Goy-Houten: Hes & de Graaf, 2007

CCCL Corpus Christianorum Series Latina

CCCM Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis

CCTPL Corpus Christianorum Thesaurus Patrum Latinorum

DIMEV Digital Index of Middle English Verse

EEBO Early English Books Online. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/

eebogroup/

EEMF Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile

EETS Early English Text Society

es Extra Series

os Ordinary Series

ss Supplementary Series

FCMC Fathers of the Church, Mediaeval Continuation

IMEP Index of Middle English Prose

LALME A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English. Edited by Angus

McIntosh, M. L. Samuels, and Michael Benskin. 4 vols.

Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986

MED Middle English Dictionary
OED Oxford English Dictionary

PL Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Latina. Edited by Jacques-

Paul Migne. 221 vols. Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1844–65

PRME The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England

SC Sources Chrétiennes STC Short Title Catalogue

TEAMS Teaching Association for Medieval Studies

Introduction

DANIEL DONOGHUE, JAMES SIMPSON, NICHOLAS WATSON, ANNA WILSON

History bears witness to the cataclysmic effect on society of inventions of new media for the transmission of information among persons. The development of writing and later the development of printing are examples.¹

THE "GUTENBERG REVOLUTION" served as a touchstone for western intellectuals during much of the second half of the twentieth century, especially during the decades of the Cold War. The standard account, popularized by scholars such as Marshall McLuhan, tells a familiar march-of-progress narrative, in which the invention of printing happily launched western Europe into an era of intellectual, political, religious, and economic achievement.² Scholars of European and global premodernity, however, never accepted the oversimplifications of this potted history, and chafed both at its assumptions about the unequivocally positive effects of the new medium and especially at all it incuriously projects onto earlier centuries, which in popular and learned accounts have been obliged, once again, to represent the darkness before the dawn of modernity.³

Today we inhabit a world of temporal mirroring: for the past three decades we have been immersed in another revolution "of new media for the transmission of information" on an effectively global scale, like a vast cultural experiment taking place in real time.⁴ This unprecedentedly rapid new

- Nancy St John, writing in the American Journal of Sociology 73, no. 2 (1967): 255, quoted in Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 3.
- Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017; orig. pub. 1962). Compare, for example, a recent material analysis of the specific changes to reading associated with the early decades of the printing press: Alexandra Da Costa, Marketing English Books, 1476–1550: How Printers Changed Reading (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- ³ See, e.g., Joseph A. Dane, *The Myth of Print Culture: Essays on Evidence, Textuality and Bibliographical Method* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); James Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and Its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
- ⁴ Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*. For one of the less breathless accounts of the digital "revolution," albeit still imbued by McLuhanite historiography,

revolution demands a reassessment of the pieties and prejudices associated with the information-technology revolution of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by seeking a deeper awareness of the counter-currents characteristic of such moments of dramatic cultural change, including "the cataclysmic effect on society" of the new order.

The 1990s digital revolution was thought to generate, as the print revolution and its contemporary, the Protestant Reformation, is still often claimed to have generated, the unqualified good of more readers with access to vastly wider ranges of reading material. The unmediated reading of scripture, for example, finds its parallel in the immediate access to digital information. Paeans to the digital revolution still ring with the unqualified confidence of John Foxe's praise of the printing press in *Acts and Monuments*, whereby "knowledge groweth, judgement increaseth, bookes are dispersed . . . stories be opened, times compared, truth decerned, falsehode detected." 5

The optimism of the first phase of the digital revolution was not wholly unfounded. In the 2020s, this dream of a world transformed for the better through new reading technologies still finds partial realization in the immense vitality of online reading communities, who have wrested these technologies towards collective expression, community-formation, activism, and pleasure. However weary we may have become with the ways in which the internet seemingly insinuates itself into every facet of our lives, most of us with access to it still use it to look up the weather forecast, check in on loved ones, see how folk have dealt with one or another practical problem, or work away from our offices. This book, largely written during the long months of pandemic when the contributors and editors never met, could not have been completed without the internet.

And yet, thirty years into the digital era, there can be no question that the full picture is, to say the least, more complicated and darker. In an era of normative literacy, the ubiquity of digital reading is changing our habits of thought and feeling and cultural attitudes at individual and societal levels. Although

see John Naughton, From Gutenberg to Zuckerberg: Disruptive Innovation in the Age of the Internet (London: Quercus, 2012).

John Foxe, The First Volume of the Ecclesiasticall History: Contayning the Actes and Monumentes of Thynges Passed in Euery Kynges Tyme in This Realme (London: Printed by Iohn Daye, 1570), Book 6, 858. Foxe's account of the high cost and consequent "raritie" of books, the "darth (dearth) of good bookes" (508), widespread illiteracy, and omnipresent censorship across the unnumbered centuries before Gutenberg remains influential to this day. The context of the passage is a divisive polemic against the Papacy, occasioned by Foxe's account of events in the late 1420s and early 1430s, including the Norwich heresy trials and the Council of Basel.

online communities, encouraged by targeted algorithms, are thriving, they are also isolating the members of those communities from any larger public forum or whatever once existed of a consensus view or genuinely public sphere. On a more personal level, the continual use of digital media both encourages mental multi-tasking and discourages deep reading. What serves for many as a serious source of distraction may even be changing the wiring of our brains.⁶

Over the past decade in particular, moreover, the larger economic and political landscapes of our societies have been resculpted by the internet's ability to synthesize intimate information about our habits and proclivities, to disseminate "falsehode" as well as "truth," and to substitute conviction for expertise. We might revise a line of W. B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming": "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate mendacity." In the face of both institutional surveillance and social media truth-fabrication, many of us have discovered that protocols of critical reading, nurtured so diligently, or so we thought, throughout entire educational systems, are fragile and defenseless. Apparently we must learn to read and to consider the personal, social, political, and even planetary "implications of literacy," all over again.⁷

Turning to medieval reading to aid us in considering reading in the twenty-first century may seem paradoxical in the light of the parallels that are constantly drawn between the print and digital revolutions. Any apparent paradox, however, dissolves on inspection. The early recognition of shared ground between manuscript-reading and web-reading cultures placed medievalists at the forefront of the creation of the digital humanities. The digital edition, with its capacity to layer the visual representations of textual instability and interactivity, can from many respects simulate the medieval reading experience better than the stasis of print. Moreover, medieval glosses, hypertexts, and text/image relations can gaze at each other across a span of centuries as they offer complementary analogues of the reading practices enabled by each medium.⁸

- Maryanne Wolf, Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World (New York: Harper, 2018).
- ⁷ Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).
- See, e.g., Alison Tara Walker, "The Boundless Book: A Conversation between the Pre-modern and Posthuman," *DHQ* 7, no. 1 (2013): n.p.; Farkas Gábor Kiss, Eyal Poleg, Lucie Doležalová, and Rafal Wójcik, "Old Light on New Media: Medieval Practices in the Digital Age," *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures* 2, no. 1 (2013): 16–34; David J. Birnbaum, Sheila Bonde, and Mike Kestemont, "The Digital Middle Ages: An Introduction," in "The Digital Middle Ages," *Speculum*

More broadly, medievalists have also found a surprising kinship with the new literatures and literacies that have blossomed in the digital revolution. Scholars of premodern reading are in a position to theorize the turn towards literary modes of adaptation, allusion, and retelling in digital literatures such as fanfiction and social media "memes." That these digital modes create textual communities like those described by Brian Stock in eleventh- and twelfth-century monastic settings is not so surprising, perhaps, if we consider that the digital medium encourages what media theorists have called "social reading," that is, communal interpretive experiences rooted in shared commentary and dialogue between readers. ¹⁰

Finally, both the heady cultural optimism that greeted the emergence of the internet and the trepidation that has increasingly qualified it themselves have equivalents in many moments across the medieval centuries. As has become increasingly clear in studies of medieval reading over the past thirty years, the discourses around education, truth, knowledge, and textual mediation into which print emerged had been hashed out, over and over again, in a range of institutional contexts and cultural situations, for centuries beforehand. These situations offer their own analogies to the digital revolution, and in doing so push back against the teleological, not to say eschatological, thinking that result from easy invocations of the Gutenberg Revolution.

§

The topic of the Bloomfield Conference, "Reading Then, Reading Now," held over three days in April 2019 in the Department of English at Harvard University, was selected with the whole of this complicated contemporary situation in view. Thirty scholars at all career stages, who specialize in all periods of medieval English literature, presented papers that brought a range of questions and methodologies to the topic. Twelve were subsequently revised in the light of the conference discussions for this volume.

^{92,} no. S1 (2017): S1–S38. See also Michael Hanrahan and Bridget Whearty, eds., "Special Issue: Digital Medieval Manuscript Cultures," *Archive Journal*, September 2018, https://www.archivejournal.net/essays/digital-medieval-manuscript-cultures/.

See e.g., Anna Wilson, "Fan Fiction and Premodern Literature: Methods and Definitions," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 36 (2021), https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2021.2037; Kavita Mudan Finn and Jessica McCall, "Exit, pursued by a fan: Shakespeare, Fandom, and the Lure of the Alternate Universe," *Critical Survey* 28, no. 2, Special Issue: Creative Critical Shakespeares (2016): 27–38.

José Antonio Cordón García, Julio Alonso Arévalo, Raquel Gómez Díaz, and Daniel Linder, Social Reading: Platforms, Applications, Clouds and Tags (Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2013).

The editors selected the chapters with an eye to the following: their intellectual interactions with one another; the more particular goal of enriching the conversation between Old English and Middle English studies; and the coherence of the resulting book. The magnet of our conference title attracted a wide range of uniformly excellent papers, but for the purposes of shaping a coherent book, we redefined the scope of our project: no longer reading now and reading then, but a more specific, bifocal topic of the practices and politics of premodern reading in Britain.

Reading is a mature topic for medievalists, who have studied it from different angles for well over seventy-five years. H. R. Chaytor's *From Script to Print* (1945) inaugurated the modern study of medieval media by challenging many of the assumptions about textuality that scholars had imbibed from presupposing the superiority of print. E. R. Curtius's *European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages* (1948) taught medievalists to think with the *topoi* that are a crucial feature of all literatures in the western classical tradition, but also proposed a new, internationalizing account of European culture to a continent torn by nationalist total war. Jean Leclercq's *Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (1957) and Henri de Lubac's *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture* (1959–64) taught us to understand the medieval Christian Scriptures both as a web of meanings linked by verbal concatenation and as a well of meanings accessible by allegoresis. These books also proposed a new, mobile account of religious tradition to a Catholic Church in the throes of reform during the era of the Second Vatican Council.

Even D. W. Robertson, whose *A Preface to Chaucer* (1962) generated fierce debate throughout the 1960s and 1970s by applying a mode of biblical

- ¹¹ H. J. Chaytor, *From Script to Print: an Introduction to Medieval Vernacular Literature* (Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1945). See especially chap. 1, "Reading and Writing," 5–21.
- Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953). Orig. pub. as Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter (Bern: A. Francke, 1948).
- Jean Leclercq, The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture, trans. Catharine Misrahi, 3rd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982). Orig. pub. as L'amour des Lettres et le Désir de Dieu: Initiation aux Auteurs Monastiques du Moyen Age (Paris: Éditions Du Cerf, 1957). Henri de Lubac, Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture, trans. Marc Sebanc and E. M. Macierowski, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). Orig. pub. as Exégèse médiévale: les quatres sens de l'Écriture, vols. 41.1–2, 42 and 59 of Théologie, 2 vols. in 4 (Paris: Aubier, 1959–64). See also Beryl Smalley, The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964) and Gilbert Dahan, L'Exégése Chrétienne de la Bible en Occident Médiéval XII–XIV siècle (Paris: Cerf, 1999).

6

allegoresis derived from Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana* to Chaucer's poetry, was doing more than to insist that literary studies scholars professionalize their approaches to the Middle Ages by taking medieval Christian reading practices seriously. In opposition to colleagues who were increasingly adapting the insights of "close reading" to the specific, often aural circumstances of medieval textuality, Robertson was refusing the claims to universality and objecting to the ahistoricism of certain of the humanist reading practices that had developed over the prior fifty years, including the formalized practice of close reading itself.¹⁴

From the exceptionally fertile period of scholarship by medievalists between 1980 and 2000, we isolate three currents of scholarly activity pointed explicitly or implicitly to reading practice. The first such powerful current built on the generative mid-twentieth-century studies mentioned above. It devoted its attention primarily to learned culture and the illumination of canonical texts. For such scholarship, pre-modern reading happened for the most part in relatively enclosed spaces and communities: monastic scriptoria, scholarly studies, the socially-restricted elite reading communities, and individual psyches of the highly literate. Studies by the following, for example, were primarily focused on the reading practices of elite communities: A. J. Minnis's recovery of high and late-medieval scholastic reading practices, beginning with *Medieval Theory of Authorship* (1984); Mary Carruthers's studies of ancient and medieval reading as monastic self-fashioning, beginning with *The Book of Memory* (1990); Rita Copeland's analyses of translation as cultural transmission, beginning with *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages* (1990); and Martin

- See D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962) and the essays by E. T. Donaldson, "Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: The Opposition" and R. E. Kaske, "Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: The Defense," in Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1958–1959, ed. Dorothy Bethurum (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 1–26 and 27–60, respectively. For the position taken by Morton W. Bloomfield, see, e.g., "Patristics and Old English Literature: Notes on Some Poems," Comparative Literature 14, no. 1 (1962): 36–43. For a recent defense of Robertson, which also lists numerous attacks, see Steven Justice, "Who Stole Robertson?," PMLA 124, no. 2 (2009): 609–15.
- See, e.g., Erich Auerbach's characteristically wide-ranging Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and the Middle Ages, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965). Orig. pub. as Literatursprache und Publikum in der lateinischen Spätantike und im Mittelalter (Bern: A. Francke, 1958).

Irvine's complementary work on the reading practices associated with early medieval grammaticality, in *The Making of Textual Culture* (1994).¹⁶

These books and their sequels were richly aware of the return to first principles taking place in literary studies more broadly at the time they were written, under the umbrella term *theory*. Here, they joined forces with other kinds of medieval literary scholarship from these decades that were in more explicit dialogue with contemporary literary studies. A case in point is Carolyn Dinshaw's *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (1989), one of a series of books from these decades informed by feminism, whose chapters work towards a mode of reading that, through Dinshaw and others' later work, would come to be celebrated, and institutionalized, as queer.¹⁷

A second current of scholarship from the 1980s and 1990s proved equally influential. This scholarship explored the links between learned and literate-but-unlearned and thereby for the most part non-Latinate readers and reading practices (often associated with open, potentially uncontained, public spaces). This mixed body of work had its own antecedents, with which it was in often vexed relationship, ranging from a tradition of scholarship on the history of Bible translation, to the comparative scholarship on oral cultures developed by Albert Lord (1912–91), Walter Ong (1912–2003), and others. Like its disciplinary neighbor, early modern New Historicism, this medieval scholarship also had affiliations with the study of reading practice contemporary with it, especially the work that since the 1960s consolidated

- See A. J. Minnis, Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) (1st ed. 1984); Mary Carruthers, The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) (1st ed. 1990); Rita Copeland, Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Martin Irvine, The Making of Textual Culture: "Grammatica" and Literary Theory, 350–1100 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- Carolyn Dinshaw, Chaucer's Sexual Poetics (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). See also Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., Premodern Sexualities (London: Routledge, 1996); Carolyn Dinshaw, Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); and Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, eds., Queering the Middle Ages (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
- Margaret Deanesly, The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920); Albert B. Lord, The Singer of Tales (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (London: Methuen, 1982).

around the term "culture," much of it indebted to Marxism and including work on popular cultures of dissent.¹⁹

Crucial books from these decades that focus on the early and later Middle Ages include: Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe's *Visible Song* (1990), which locates a residual orality in the scribal copying of Old English verse texts; Brian Stock's *The Implications of Literacy* (1983), with its generatively portable account of non-elite reading as taking place within "textual communities," not all of whose members had significant literacy skills; and Michael Clanchy's provocative account of the development of bureaucratic textuality in *From Memory to Written Record* (1979). The latter two books inform Steven Justice's powerful reconstruction of popular literate practice in his *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381.* ²¹

Although it does not represent itself as a study of reading, the most influential such study that has a late-medieval focus is unquestionably Anne Hudson's magisterial *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (1988), along with the array of articles on the Middle English literature of religious dissent on which it was based.²² Hudson's book precipitated a burst of scholarly activity that brought issues of reading to the study of wider political and hermeneutic themes, including the diffusion of the vernacular Bible, the debates around that diffusion, and official attempts to contain it. *The Premature Reformation* had the effect of inaugurating a broader turn away from the orality/literacy dyad to a new focus on the vernacular.²³ By the time

- Although Marxist cultural analysis entered medieval studies through many routes, the work of Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) and Raymond Williams (1921–88) was of special importance in relation to the study of reading. See, e.g., Bruce W. Holsinger, "Medieval Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and the Genealogies of Critique," Speculum 77, no. 4 (2002): 1195–1227.
- Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Stock, Implications of Literacy; Michael Clanchy, From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307, 3rd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) (1st ed. 1979). See also Michael Clanchy, Looking Back from the Invention of Printing: Mothers and the Teaching of Reading in the Middle Ages (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018).
- Steven Justice, Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
- Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); and Anne Hudson, *Lollards and Their Books* (Stroud: Hambledon Press, 1985), the latter a collection of Hudson's essays published over the previous fifteen years.
- Mary Dove, The First English Bible: The Text and Context of The Wycliffite Versions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Mary Dove, The Earliest

David Wallace's *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* appeared in 1999, this term was becoming so widely used in Middle English scholarship as to become a subject of critical enquiry in its own right.²⁴

Over the past twenty years, moreover, in part as a result of new attention to the range and cultural importance of early and high medieval literacies, use of the term "vernacular" has been taken up by scholarship on the English literatures of earlier centuries, including Anglo-Norman French and, more recently, Old English. Although study of medieval orality and its relationship to textual culture continues, much of this work is at present configured less around the written traces of oral literatures than around discussions of voice: from the voice of the author, seeking to establish textual intimacy with readers to create shared experience; to the voice of the reader mediating a text to an audience; to what we might think of as the voice or oral trace within certain kinds of text that cause scribes to vary in their written performances, creating the phenomenon that Paul Zumthor's Essai de poétique médiévale (1972) termed mouvance.

Advocates of the English Bible: The Texts of the Medieval Debate (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2010). For the hermeneutic debates around the vernacular Bible, see Kantik Ghosh, The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For the ecclesio-political response to censorship, see Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409," Speculum 70, no. 4 (1995): 822–64, supplemented (and critiqued) by many essays in After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England, ed. Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For critique of "vernacular" as used in this volume, see Sarah Stanbury, "Vernacular Nostalgia and The Cambridge History of English Literature," Texas Studies in Literature and Language 44, no. 1 (2002): 92–107. For analysis of the category as it related to Middle English, see the essays and excerpts in 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).

See Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Thelma Fenster, and Delbert W. Russell, eds., Vernacular Literary Theory from the French of Medieval England: Texts and Translations, c.1120-c.1450 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2016); Irina Dumitrescu, The Experience of Education in Anglo-Saxon Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Jessica Barr, Intimate Reading: Textual Encounters in Medieval Women's Visions and Vitae (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020); Joyce Coleman, Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Daniel Donoghue, How the Anglo-Saxons

A third current of scholarship on medieval reading that gathered force in the last years of the twentieth century, at the same time as the digital revolution was itself gathering force, focused on the material history of the pre-modern media of reading: manuscripts, incunabula, booklets, image texts, scrolls, and walls and other surfaces.²⁷ Although much of this work is particularist, to the extent that specialists in this area have themselves identified "archival fetishism" as a potential problem,²⁸ its interests are interdisciplinary. Much like the new media, many medieval books were intricately interactive, meant to be seen, sung from, and performed with as well as read, as many have recognized.²⁹

The roots of this scholarship are correspondingly multiple. They include the herculean labors of paleographers like N. R. Ker (1908–82) in dating and localizing medieval English books (a project whose first beginnings go back to the sixteenth century), as well as the synthesizing work of Malcolm Parkes

Read Their Poems (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); and Paul Zumthor, Toward a Medieval Poetics, trans. Phillip Bennett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). Orig. pub. as Essai de poétique médiévale (Paris: Éditions Du Seuil, 1972). For medieval conceptions of voice, see the essays in Voice and Voicelessness in Medieval Europe, ed. Irit Ruth Kleinman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

See, e.g., Book Production and Publishing in Britain, 1375–1475, ed. Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume 1, c.400–1100, ed. Malcolm R. Godden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Vol. II, 1100–1400, ed. Nigel J. Morgan and Rodney M. Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially Pamela Robinson, "The Format of Books: Books, Booklets, and Rolls," 39–54; The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Vol. III, 1400–1557, ed. Lotte Hellinga (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and, in a different vein, Vincent Gillespie, Looking in Holy Books: Essays on Late Medieval Religious Writing in England (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

Andrew Taylor, *Textual Situations: Three Medieval Manuscripts and Their Readers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 197–208 ("The Manuscript as Fetish"). Taylor draws on Dominick Lacapra, "Is Everyone a Mentalité Case? Transference and the 'Culture' Concept," *History and Theory* 23, no. 3 (1984): 296–311.

Among numerous studies, see, e.g., M. J. Toswell, The Anglo-Saxon Psalter (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014); Jeffrey F. Hamburger, Script as Image (Paris: Peeters, 2014); and Martha Dana Rust, Imaginary Worlds in Medieval Books: Exploring the Manuscript Matrix (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

(1930–2013), Derek Pearsall (1931–2021), and others, who have completed the translation of codicology from ancillary to frontline discipline.³⁰

Reading is only one of a number of interests pursued by manuscript scholars. However, the sustained study of medieval books – perhaps especially the unspectacular anthologies and "bespoke" miscellanies in which many vernacular texts circulated, outside the great religious houses, royal courts, cathedrals, and universities³¹ – makes it possible to reconstruct, as it were experimentally, specific aspects of the experience of being a medieval reader. For such a reader, knowledge may not be automatically accessible or neatly divided into areas, disciplines, or languages.³² In these and other areas, historical study of the medieval manuscript has from the start been in dialogue with scholarly modes of receiving such texts, which range from reader reception theory developed by the school of Konstanz in the 1970s³³ to the field of media studies as this has built on its McLuhanite foundation over the course of the past few decades.³⁴

- N. R. Ker, Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957); M. B. Parkes, Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Derek Pearsall, Manuscripts and Texts: Editorial Problems in Later Middle English Literature (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987).
- For two of many examples, see the Vercelli, Biblioteca e Archivivio Capitolare, CXVII (tenth century), discussed by Daniel Donoghue in this volume; and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Digby 86, discussed in *Interpreting MS Digby 86: A Trilingual Book from Thirteenth-century Worcestershire*, ed. Susanna Fein (York: York Medieval Press, 2019).
- Scholarship on "miscellanies" has been especially productive here. See, e.g., Ralph Hanna III, "Miscellaneity and Vernacularity: Conditions of Literary Production in Late Medieval England," in *The Whole Book: Cultural Perspectives on the Medieval Miscellany*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols and Siegfried Wenzel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 37–52.
- See Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction, ed. Robert C. Holub (London: Methuen, 1984); and Holub's "Reception Theory: School of Constance," in The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume 8: From Formalism to Poststructuralism, ed. Raman Selden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 319–46. The most forceful American proponent of reception theory was Stanley Fish, who started out as a late medievalist. See his Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). For an ethical critique of Fish, see James Simpson, "Ethics and Interpretation: Reading Wills in Chaucer's Legend of Good Women," Studies in the Age of Chaucer 20 (1998): 73–100.
- ³⁴ Introductions to media studies include Media Studies: A Reader, ed. Sue Thornham, Caroline Bassett, and Paul Marris, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); and the vast International Encyclopedia of Media Studies: Media

This is also perhaps the area of medieval literary studies that has benefited most profoundly from the development of digital media.

In the early 2020s, work on medieval reading often still draws upon one or more of these broad approaches to the topic. Among these are a turn by some scholars away from the "symptomatic" reading methods associated with the late twentieth-century literary theory towards explicitly trusting or "surface" readings of medieval texts, ³⁵ but also continued debates over the need to temper historically situated hermeneutics with others rooted in the present, such as queer studies or critical race theory. ³⁶ Viewed from a distance, the broader categories of trust vs. suspicion, and text vs. context repeat many of the same essential questions with which the medieval subjects of our chapters wrestled, as these questions are revitalized today by new theories, perspectives, technologies, archives, and political currents.

§

The chapters in *The Practice and Politics of Reading* explore parts of the large field of early English textual and visual evidence, from the late seventh century down to the late fifteenth. We present them in two, non-exclusive groupings: The Practice of Reading, and The Politics of Reading.

Chapters presented under the heading "The Practice of Reading" take us to a set of pre-modern foci on reading that, explicitly or not, have contemporary twins. Although the group follows a rough historical progression, they are organized by theme, not chronology. They move from a chapter on the physical mechanics of reading; to one on the readerly apprehension of verbal patterns; to a group of four that consider the ethical and psychic work of

History and the Foundations of Media Studies, 7 vols., gen. ed. Angharad N. Valdivia (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). Medievalists interact with this body of commentary and theory, e.g., in Arthur Bahr, Fragments and Assemblages: Forming Compilations of Medieval London (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013); and Old Media and the Medieval Concept: Media Ecologies Before Early Modernity, ed. Thorla Brylowe and Stephen Yeager (Montreal: Concordia University Press, 2021).

Rita Felski, The Limits of Critique (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," Representations 108 (2009): 1–21.

See, e.g., Valerie Traub, "The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies," PMLA 128, no. 1 (2013): 21–39; Geraldine Heng, "Reinventing Race, Colonization, and Globalisms across Deep Time: Lessons from the Longue Durée," PMLA 130, no. 2 (2015): 358–66; Dorothy Kim, ed., "Special Issue: Critical Race and the Middle Ages," Literature Compass 16, nos. 9–10 (2019): n.p., especially Adam Miyashiro, "Our Deeper Past: Race, Settler Colonialism, and Medieval Heritage Politics," and Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh, "The Depoliticized Saracen and Muslim Erasure."

reading as an intellectual, spiritual, and embodied practice in a range of texts and textual communities. All but one chapter focuses on vernacular texts.

In "Literally, What Did Medieval Readers See?" Daniel Donoghue draws on cognitive psychology to elucidate the "choreography between the eyes and brain" inferable from manuscripts containing texts in Old or Middle English, starting with the Vercelli manuscript. Arguing that humanists would do well to pay as close attention to the "physical act of reading" as does the Vercelli scribe, whose practices have been misunderstood, he shows that aspects of scribal word division and layout in Old and early Middle English manuscripts that are often treated as primitive show "surprising alertness to the way the eyes and brain coordinate with one another in the complex dance of reading." Attention to this phenomenon "may reframe our current" – and still inappropriately teleological – "histories of the visual layout of poems."

In "Reading for the Ornament: Repetition and Structure in the Old English Exodus," Emily Thornbury uses Adeline Courtney Bartlett's fundamental study of "rhetorical patterns" in Old English poetry, published in 1935, to develop her own lesson in alertness, here in relation to readerly apprehension of ornament in "one, highly-wrought poem," Exodus. Proposing what is effectively a mode of "surface reading," her chapter explicates the intricate "envelope" and other patterns that structured both the poem and its individual passages, making significant demands on medieval and modern audiences and readers. Building a case for the poem's formal integrity as well as intricacy, she concludes that we need to recognize "the superficial as essential, the ornamental as integral" to the thematic work carried out by this epic account of the Israelites' escape from Egypt.

In "A Canterbury School of Literary Theory: Aldhelm's *De virginitate*, the *Liber monstrorum*, and (Un)Reliable Fictions," Erica Weaver explores several of the rich array of hermeneutic templates that were applied to reading in eighth-century England, comparing two superbly ornamented Latin works for nuns, Aldhelm's conjoined *Prosa* and *Carmen de virginitate*, both with one another and with the playful and encyclopedic *Liber monstrorum*. Where the Old English *Exodus* demands only attentiveness, the Aldhelmian reading program emerges here as driven by careful calibration, requiring readers to engage strenuously with his athletic Latin but also to treat even attentiveness with skepticism. Stylistic virtuosity can engage but also distract. Accounts of earthly or heavenly marvels may be true, fictive, or uncertain. Reading in these communities requires a constantly alert mingling of suspicion and trust.

In "About Face: Addressing the Vernicle in Late Medieval England," Catherine Sanok moves the discussion from the early to the late medieval period, returning our gaze to "surface reading," in this case of the Vernicle, with its imprint of the face of Christ, to explicate the curious "abstraction" of images and

texts that represent or address this "immediate" and "unmediated" devotional object. Here, ornament is stripped away. Rather than draw the reader-viewer into affective contemplation of the particularities of the Passion, the Vernicle rebuffs attempts to use it in this standard devotional fashion. Rather than pointing back to the sacred historical past, the singular aesthetic conditions of the Vernicle promote an open-ended mode of self-transformation, as "the reader . . . envisions herself in a potential or future form," contemplating less in order to learn to feel than to *become*.

In "Ascetic Reading," Amy Appleford shifts the book's focus from contemplation to private liturgical practice, showing how two Middle English derivatives of the Office of the Dead also enabled readers to engage in a parallel project of becoming, in this case grounded in a radical and highly articulate tradition of Christian asceticism whose earliest Latin representative is John Cassian. Reciting the Office and its lessons from Job in versions based on the Middle English Bible, or contemplating it with the help of the intricate *Pety Job*, readers "subsume themselves into" the "person" of the afflicted prophet, as he makes his "bed" in "derknesses" and longs for the "inward chaunging" that is conversion or bodily death. In the process, readers denaturalize themselves, constructing an "ascetic identity" that encompasses body and mind.

In "Prayer at Plough: Medieval Reading Practices and the Work of the Paternoster," the final chapter in Part One, Kathryn Mogk Wagner discusses four literary accounts of the Pater Noster, from the tenth-century Old English *Solomon and Saturn* to a fifteenth-century Middle English plowman poem, in the light of recent theorizations of the agency of objects by Bruno Latour and of the work of form by Caroline Levine.³⁷ Such "poetic paratexts," she argues, reflect theoretically upon such matters as "the nature of language, the power of performative speech-acts, and the relationship between texts and the material world." Focusing on the constructive functions of prayerful reading, its "capacity to act, work, and make a difference in the world," she argues against the identification of reading with "critique," urging a return to reading modes that sustain "network[s] of relationships that includes texts, people, institutions."

Chapters presented under the heading "The Politics of Reading," take us to: the busy and public crossroad of learned textuality; the non-learned reception and remaking of learned texts; stereotyping and persecution; gender and class politics; and community-formation. These chapters move from a first pair that consider the anxiety and/or hostility to "bad" reading expressed by tenth- and twelfth-century intellectuals, to a cluster of four chapters on fifteenth-century

Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Caroline Levine, Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

topics. The first and third of these last four chapters (by Kraebel and Tonry, respectively) are concerned with how an anonymous writer and a printer sought to shape the experience of vernacular readers through textual juxtapositions and the use of paratexts in different genres and in pursuit of very different goals. The second and fourth (by Johnston and De Groot) discuss texts that either depict or were intended to generate contrasting types of reading within the spectacular context of political pageantry, especially the political funeral. All but one chapter in this second section of the volume again focus on vernacular texts.

In "Who Reads Now? The Anxieties of Millennial Reading: The 2019 Morton W. Bloomfield Lecture," Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe juxtaposes "[t]wo starkly different ideologies" for reading in early Medieval England promoted by two authorities, King Alfred and Ælfric of Eynsham, and the institutions they controlled. Motivated by desperation at the bleak state of learning after decades of Viking attacks, Alfred announced his program of translation, confident that "wise translators" could render even the most sublime Latin texts intelligible in the vernacular. By contrast, Ælfric was suspicious of readers without sufficient education who might indulge in unsupervised interpretation, especially of scripture. Reading was "doctrinally fraught" and required the same kind of interpretive guidance Ælfric models in his homilies and saints' lives. For Alfred, reading was a solution to a problem. For Ælfric "reading itself was a problem."

In "The Jewish Reader: A Medieval Antitype," Samantha Seal traces the consequences of another program of translation: that of the Parisian theologians of the twelfth century who sought out the exegetical learning of contemporary Jewish thinkers. These encounters with a body of increasingly allegorical Talmudic scholarship provoked a crisis in Christian efforts to ward off overly "literal" interpretations of scripture by antisemitic invocations of the "Jewish reader" aimed at Christian audiences. Resisting the tendency to celebrate the Parisian Hebraists through a rosy lens of interfaith collaboration, Seal argues for a causal relationship between the ability of the Parisian theologians to absorb Jewish scholarship and the violent removal of Jewish communities from late-thirteenth-century France and England. "Medieval Christianity had no place," it seems, "for Jews who kept reading."

In "Biblical Compilation, Regional Reading, and Tailored Texts: The Making of Selwyn College MS 108 L. 1," Andrew Kraebel takes us to the turn of the fifteenth century, reconstructing an interconnected set of Bible translation projects, focusing on one he calls the "Paues compilation," after its editor. The existence of these accretive and fragmentary translations invites new questions about contemporary attitudes to vernacular Bible reading, which evidently cannot be reduced to "for" versus "against." Avoiding the

impersonality of address that characterizes the Wycliffite Bible, the Paues compilation, with its introductory dialogue, prefaces and other paratexts, more resembles a work in the devotional tradition, evoking "an extended relationship of pastoral care and textual making, with a writer compiling, translating, revising, and composing, all for the sake of his reader."

Taken together, the final chapters in the volume (by Johnston, Tonry, and De Groot) offer a trio of case studies from the long and politicized history of western media. These begin with a fifteenth-century evocation of public reading in a heroic distant past when delivering a written letter was a rare and carefully premeditated event; they then move on to the world of early print, where the economics of print runs required the artful consolidation or creation of classes of reader. They end by returning us to the digital revolution, where this introduction begins, by an unexpected route: the continuities across time of the iconography of civic spectacles and the clouds of conflicting interpretation they evoke, whether in the late-fourteenth-century form of open-air gossip or its contemporary electronic descendant, the tweet.

In "Reading the Fair Maid of Astolat: Editorial Practice, Performative Emotionality, and Communal Forms of Reading," Andrew James Johnston analyzes the Maid of Astolat episode in Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Developing the implications of what he argues is a scribal error, Johnston rereads Elaine's attempt to manipulate the spatial and affective staging of her own death pageant before the Arthurian court. When Arthur removes the letter clutched in the hand of Elaine's beautiful corpse, her control in directing events is superseded by the gender dynamics of the court. The contrast between Elaine's plan for a simultaneous reading of both letter and corpse by a mixed audience, and the public readings that actually transpire, offers her death pageant as "a theater where the limitations of female agency" in this fictional setting "are renegotiated."

In "Marx Goes Fishing: the Temporalities of Idleness," Kathleen Tonry examines one of Wynkyn de Worde's less well-known early publications, *The Book of Hawking, Hunting, and Blasing of Arms* (1496), and a curious work he inserted into it, *The Treatyse of Fysshynge wyth an Angle*, to ask what this conjunction tells us about the social status of de Worde's anticipated readership, and the wider relations between readers, labor, and temporality in fifteenth-century England. Beginning with Marx's idealization of labor as "attractive work," Tonry views De Worde's insertion of the *Treatyse* among conventional seigneurial texts on topics like hunting and coats of arms as a strategic choice, highlighting the "merry occupacion" of fishing – and the very act of reading a treatise about it – for readers with ample wealth and leisure time. De Worde's construction of the material book produces a set of temporal relations that manifest that political and economic power of its readers.

Finally, in "Shining Cities: Communal Reading and the New Jerusalem from Maidstone to McCain," Michelle DeGroot introduces the concept of "communal reading" to analyze the collective interpretive activity that surrounds political pageantry, both medieval and modern: the 1392 pageant welcoming Richard II into London in the first case, and US Senator John McCain's 2018 state funeral in the second. Teasing out the medievalism of McCain's self-scripted funeral, De Groot argues that these apparently distant efforts to shape public consciousness are both expressions of a tradition of Christian civic idealism she identifies with the ideal of the state as "city on the hill," an earthly New Jerusalem. Reading these events through texts which simultaneously create and document the experience of communal reading, she explores the way these moments of communal reading evoke both unity and its impossibility.

8

Despite their heuristic separation in this volume, taken as a whole, these chapters show what has become ever clearer and more urgently expressed within our discipline: that the practice and politics of reading are fundamentally interwoven. The landscape of medieval studies into which this volume appears in print has already changed from the one in which its originating conference took place in 2019. Such temporal dislocations are an inevitable part of the publishing process. Seldom, however, does that process bracket a global catastrophe, the COVID-19 pandemic. The "now" of this volume is, of course, contingent and self-reflexive, enacting in its own moment the topic it historicizes. We are confident that its diverse historical analyses of reading practices and politics are of lasting value; it may also turn out that the volume offers a variety of conversations about reading that took place on the brink of a dramatic shift. We have yet to see how the post-pandemic condition and its past will redefine one another; no matter how that dynamic plays out, the chapters in this volume model what it means to read in the present, however we define that present. When we read, we negotiate our own relations with history. Medieval readers knew that, in ways that we will need to relearn.