Medieval Texts in Context

Edited by

Denis Renevey and
Graham D. Caie

Context and Genre in English Literature

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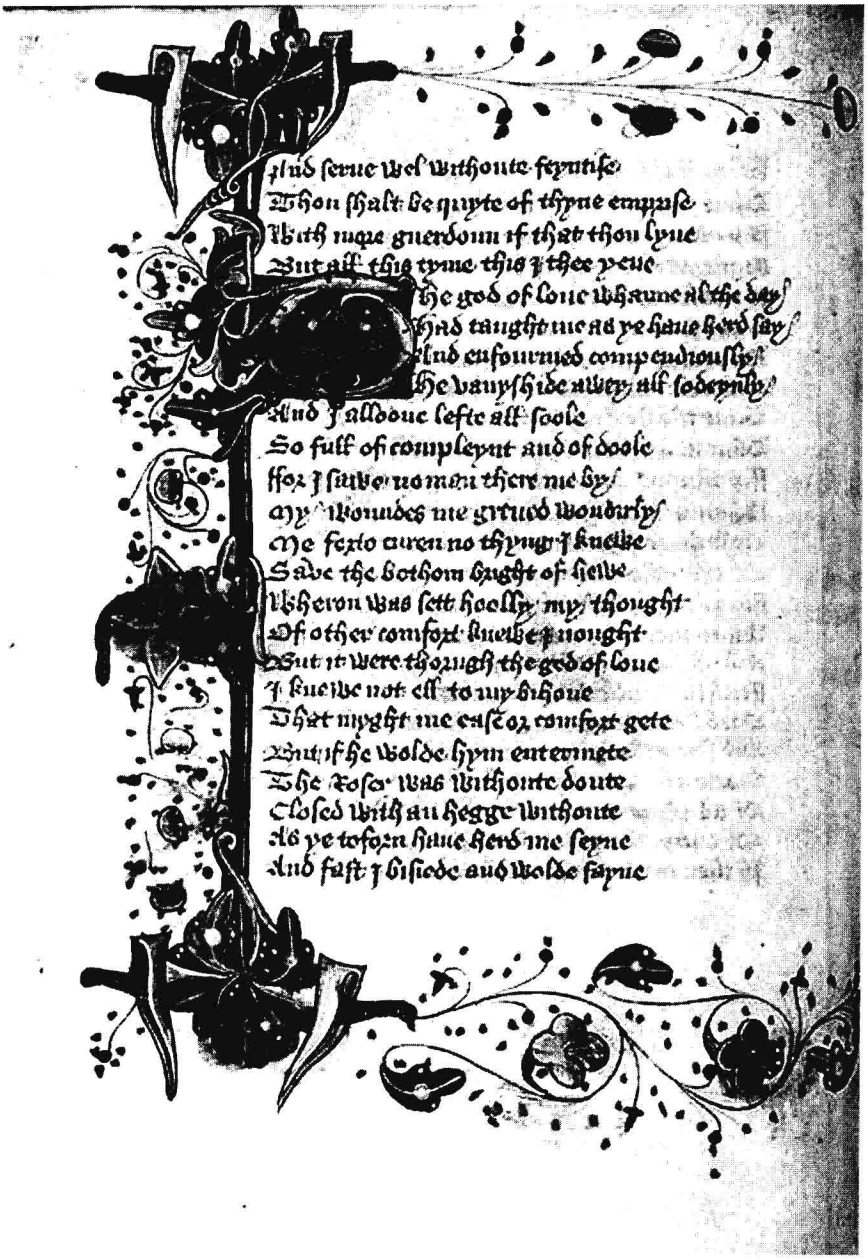
This book is dedicated to our children, Clara Maud and Joachim, Eleanor and Peter, and we are grateful to them for allowing their fathers, with an infectious enthusiasm and sense of humour, to bring this work to a conclusion.

Denis Renevey and Graham D. Caie

Abbreviations

CCCC	Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis (Turnhout, 1966–).
EETS	Early English Text Society; volume numbers in the Original Series are prefixed o.s., those in the Extra Series are prefixed e.s., those in the Supplementary Series are prefixed s.s.
LALME	*A Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English*, 4 vols, ed. Angus McIntosh, M.L. Samuels, Michael Benskin; with the assistance of Margaret Laing and Keith Williamson (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986).
MED	*Middle English Dictionary*, ed. H. Kurath *et al.* (Ann Arbor MI, 1952–).
NIMEV	*A New Index of Middle English Verse*, ed. Julia Boffey and A.S.G. Edwards (London: British Library, 2004).
STC	*A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland & Ireland ... 1465–1640*, 2nd ed. W.A. Jackson, F.S. Ferguson and Katharine F. Pautzer, 3 vols (London, 1976–90).



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Introduction

Graham D. Caie and Denis Renevey

Medieval Texts in Context explores, first, the manuscript context of some medieval texts. It then naturally moves on in its second part to an exploration of the social, historical and cultural context in which medieval manuscripts circulated. This collection hence reflects and continues discussions which have taken place in the last decades in the guise of what some scholars have labelled the New Philology.[1] Hopefully it therefore answers, even if partially and at some micro level, some of the questions raised by the New Philology, without, however, claiming that it is inscribing itself specifically as a contribution to this new field, if new it still really is, or ever was.[2] However, several points raised as part of discussions related to the emergence of this new perspective on medieval textual culture are indeed central to this volume. Rather than the edited medieval text, it is the manuscript which forms the core material under investigation in this volume. It implies giving up presentation of the medieval text in the form and scientific exactitude of a printed text with variant readings supplied.[3] The object of investigation, that is the manuscript, and the methods of enquiry which it entails, such as non-hierarchical comparative work from one manuscript to another, makes possible an assessment of the medieval material as one prone to generate positively change and variation, that is textual movement from one manuscript to another, in order for the textual material to adapt itself to its new locus.[4] The manuscript stands therefore as a matrix where a dynamic interplay between ancient authorial and new scribal voices concur in the making of a multivocal, variable and contingent production that requires at least two modes of reading: a reading of the text and its numerous textual glosses, as well as a reading of visual signs.[5] In many cases, the codicological evidence is the only evidence which makes possible a discussion of audience. However, in view of the variance of the medieval artefact, and its natural movement towards adaptation for new audiences, even careful assessment yields sometimes minimal information about potential audience. As a culture of variance, manuscript culture often assumes a multiple audience for which variance should also be considered as a key concept (see for instance in this volume Gillespie's discussion of the complex Syon audience for *The Mirror to Deuout People*).[6]

Manuscript culture implies also consideration of the text and its co-texts which, to adapt Fleishman's own linguistic definition as 'the discourse surrounding a particular utterance', we understand as the other texts which are part of the same

manuscript.[7] This is of course especially true of the medieval miscellany, a very popular kind of manuscript in the late medieval period.[8] The manuscript context, its co-texts, its textual and visual signs, its layers of discourses and multiple audiences allow for a partial reconstruction of cultural and social layers which made possible the making of texts as 'acts of communication'.[9] When the manuscript context so generously yields evidence of that nature, then a larger context, a social logic of the text, can be built:

> And it is by focusing on the social logic of the text, its location within a broader network of social and intertextual relations, that we best become attuned to the specific historical conditions whose presence and/or absence *in* the work alerts us to its own social character and function, its own combination of material and discursive realities that endow it with its own sense of historical purposiveness.[10]

This is not to say that text and context should be 'collapsed into one broad vein of discursive production', as Spiegel warns us of cultural history's refusal to distinguish text and context, thus making them concurrent textual productions with mutual influences.[11] Of course, the medieval context which we can reconstruct is mediated by texts, be they symbolic or linguistic, but this should not prevent us from making distinctions between the two, and from assessing their specific relationship in a way which preserves the particular privileged position of the text over its context.

This collection of essays provides, therefore, new insights into the ways material and literary cultures interact to create textual information, and contribute to a better understanding of what that information meant to the medieval subject. The material dimension is the physical manuscript, and the literary is the witness of the text which the manuscript contains. The underlying assumption is that the manuscript can reveal many clues not only about the text itself but also about the culture in which it was produced.[12] Also, a consideration of information linked to the manuscript, such as a list, a catalogue or even scribal features shared by several manuscripts, may help in reconstructing the textual culture and the reading practice of the time period. The chapters, therefore, look at everything which surrounds a text in the codex and other contextual factors which would have influenced the medieval reading of – or listening to – a text. They help us reconstruct the medieval reading experience and give pointers as to the details on the manuscript page which would have been significant to the reader, but which might go unnoticed today.

A comparison might be made with the archaeologist who considers an artefact not in isolation but in the physical context in which it is found. As Caie states in his chapter in this collection, the archaeologist would examine the other objects in the same find, the location, the condition and all that surrounds the object to illuminate its use and status. Yet all too often medieval texts are presented in a pristine condition in neat, edited form with little hint as to the manuscript context. Such editions are necessary naturally for the modern reader who wishes to enjoy

the literary work, but if one wishes to recreate 'the medieval manuscript experience', then the text must be examined in its manuscript context. Julia Boffey in her contribution states that medieval lyrics, for example, are often presented in modern editions:

> without introductions or without explanatory detail about other texts to which they might be linked, and they thus sometimes give the appearance of floating, unanchored, among the material which surrounds them. The tendency of modern editions to group together lyrics from different sources in anthologies compiled according to a variety of principles simply reinforces this impression of unanchoredness, and encourages readers to think of each poem in isolation, as a single, independent text.[13]

New electronic devices, such as digital images placed on the web, now make it possible for the world to see the original manuscript and the text in its setting. Many scholars now accompany their edited text with a digital facsimile of the manuscript and this permits us to see, for example, the signatures of early owners and sometimes information about those who commissioned the manuscript, readers, levels of literacy, scribal habits and the dialect of the scribe. Jeremy Smith also shows how a study of orthography can reveal new insights into textual provenance and scribal practice. The quality of the membrane, the scribal hand, the layout or *mise-en-page* point to how the book was used, while gloss, marginal comment, rubric and page ruling all speak volumes in themselves about attitudes to authorship and written authority, as Caie, Peikola and Horobin point out. Other contributions to this collection examine the interface between the manuscript and early textual communities, and address questions such as ownership and reading practices, as well as looking at medieval inventories of books no longer extant. The list of French books owned by Sir John Fastolf, for instance, leads Beadle into an investigation which illuminates our understanding of fifteenth-century English textual culture. Edwards's and Cré's focus upon a single manuscript reveals new insights about the reading process, both lay and monastic, in late medieval England. Hanna, Gillespie and Renevey, via different modes of investigation, look into the phenomenon of textual production and readership. Each contribution provides groundbreaking insights into the field of medieval textual culture.

Caie starts his examination by discussing the significance of the choice of writing material – wax, membrane, paper, slate, wood or cloth – as this reflects the status of the text, its application and readership. The act of writing on membrane such as vellum, he suggests, was a complex, major commitment, which had a great influence on the authorial role. Then the script selected would indicate the prestige and perceived intrinsic worth of the work copied, in particular the difference between Latin and vernacular. The appearance of headings, marginal and interlinear glosses, historiated or illuminated capitals, lemmata and pointers suggest a text that is meant to be silently read, as they would be useless to the audience if such a text were read aloud. Such devices also aid the all-important function of the book, namely as a means of committing the text to memory. He examines the

relationship between text and marginal gloss, in particular as an important part of the reading experience of Latin texts and scholastic education. The appearance of glosses in vernacular texts in the late Middle Ages is significant, as it suggests that writers such as Gower or Chaucer, their scribes and readers, considered these works to have *auctoritas*, the standing and prestige previously awarded to clerical texts in Latin. The presentation of the vernacular poem with these trappings and in *de luxe* manuscripts raises the English poets for the first time from collators and collectors of other people's work to true authors. Much of the evidence for such a change in authorial status comes from the manuscript itself.

Manuscript evidence for the audience of a work is at the heart of Simon Horobin's contribution. He examines the Harley 3954 manuscript in order to determine, first, if Langland's *Piers Plowman* had a clerical or a literate lay readership, and, second, whether it had a London or a Midland audience. He tackles also the relationship between the A and B versions of the poem, as B is thought by some to precede A. After close manuscript analysis he concludes that the Harley version was intended for certain religious houses in a small area of South Norfolk and North Suffolk. There is evidence of scribal editorial activity, marked by a lack of 'respect for the integrity of the differing versions', which Horobin suggests was more widespread than hitherto thought. He is able to show the way in which the scribe-editor worked and the reasons for his changes, namely the fact that the A version would better suit his target audience, a clerical provincial community. The stress which the A version places on the significance of penance and the priest's responsibility for confession, would have appealed more to this audience. Once more the glosses provide important pointers, as the need for vernacular marginalia points to the level of Latin literacy of the intended readers.

The company which a work keeps (its co-texts) provides important clues as to how the author, or at least the medieval manuscript compiler, interpreted the work. The boundaries between secular and religious lyrics, for example, are generally very unclear and classification is at best unhelpful, but editors for centuries separated lyrics into collections of what they considered companions. Julia Boffey, however, stresses the need to scrutinise manuscripts, compare witnesses and investigate the surroundings of lyrics to uncover their affiliations. She shows how palaeographical evidence can reveal if a lyric has been added at a later date or in another hand and is not part of the compiler's overall plan for the collection. As Caie suggests, our reading of the Old English poem *The Wife's Lament* is influenced by this unhelpful title given by modern editors and we overlook the vital evidence afforded by the religious poetry which precedes and follows it. Similarly, modern editors and anthologists take lyrics, probably because of their brevity, and place them together in a heterogeneous collection or at best a grouping which reflects the editor's interpretation of the lyrics, without recourse to the manuscript context. Julia Boffey takes the example of Gower's *Traitié pour essampler les amantz marietz*, which is generally attached to his *Confessio Amantis*; it would appear that Gower, who was keen on supervising scribal copying of his works, wished his readers to see a connection between the two. Other authors such as Hoccleve, who write autograph copies of their poetry, must have desired their shorter poems

to be read in manuscript sequence. The sequence of longer lyrics, such as those associated with Charles of Orleans in Harley 682, is also significant: Boffey states that 'the coherence and comprehensibility of the sequence largely depends on each short poem occupying a particular place in the unfolding story. It would be hard to shuffle them around into a different order and still produce overall sense.' Other manuscripts contain some of these poems in the same order, which would point to a recognised sequence. Once more, marginal devices come to our rescue, and Boffey demonstrates how *mise-en-page*, rubrication and marginal numbers both create a unifying appearance to a sequence and also establish an order of presentation designed by the author or compiler. Such manuscript investigation can cast new light on an interpretation of many lyrics after centuries of plucking them out of context and bundling together according to the whims of scholars.

Mise-en-page is a central topic in Matti Peikola's article on the manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible. The layout of the page, as he states, 'silently guides the reader towards a certain reception – for example concerning his or her assumptions about the genre of a text or the interpretation of its argument structure'. The *mise-en-page* can also give us clues as to where the manuscript was copied, as there were different 'house rules' for layout in different scriptoria or workshops. Also, later copyists often kept the same appearance on the page, so one can detect the evolution of a text by the manuscript layout. Peikola concentrates on the ruling patterns in the manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible. This allows him to survey the distribution data in different versions and to date and locate them, with important consequences for the history of the production of the Bible as a book. The differences in the layout from what he characterises as the norm show 'an inherent variation present in manuscript culture'. He makes an analogy with Middle English language, namely an attempt to standardise, with a normative layout rather than an exact reproduction. Peikola clearly shows the neglected potential of the study of ruling practices in manuscripts, and suggests a database to track the many types of page rulings. Once more, this is only possible after a close examination of the manuscript itself.

Some of the essays also consider contexts peripheral to the manuscript. For instance, although Beadle does not look at a particular physical manuscript, his consideration of a list of French books that were owned by Sir John Fastolf yields significant information about the roles played by books among the fifteenth-century English gentry and nobility. The case of this list of French books is, however, both peculiar to Fastolf's eclectic tastes and indicative of new tastes among the educated English laity. The French books owned by Fastolf, and which may have been acquired directly, or copied, from the former French royal library bought by the Duke of Bedford, denotes a familiarity with, and a desire to emulate, the tastes and the interest in the vernacular humanism prevalent in French courtly circles. Such a humanist interest in classical and late antique learning cannot be found elsewhere among Fastolf's English contemporaries. It is, therefore, worth while reading the list of French books, as written down by William Worcester, who worked as Fastolf's secretary, as indicative of the recognition on the part of this bookish man of the significance of this segment of Fastolf's library. On the other hand, some of

the items found in the list reflect contemporary interest in private lay devotions, such as the *Somme le Roi* or the meditations in French attributed to St Bernard. Fastolf's desire to emulate French princely and ducal collections by owning not only *de luxe* manuscripts, but works reflecting French interest in classical and late antique learning is revealing of *translatio studii*. However, one is still left with the question about the exact use made of the French books owned by Sir Fastolf. Was it important that he, or someone in his household, would read them, or did they serve only as a demonstration of wealth and status, to be given as gifts to important patrons or shown as treasures to guests visiting the much-coveted and sumptuous residence of Caister? Beadle has good reason to believe that both uses were made of such French books, and that only a close reading of some of those books – when possible within their manuscript context – will yield further information about the reading practice of Fastolf and/or members of his household.

Edwards's contribution to this volume highlights the Hopton Hall Manuscript, which, having been in private hands for several centuries, has received little critical attention. Edwards not only describes the contents of this small and unpretentious codex, but also discusses the lay audience to whom the Middle English texts in it would have been directed as a tool for private devotional purposes. Using a comparison with other manuscripts (such as Bodleian Eng poet.a.1, or Tokyo, Takamiya 15, among others), Edwards is able to construct a pattern of compilation for some of the most popular works of this manuscript, although the significance of local access to texts (Hopton Hall is written in a form of Norfolk English) is not neglected. This innovative approach to a fifteenth-century vernacular manuscript throws light not only on the manuscript itself, but also on the commissioning by lay people of devotional writings, which is a mark of fifteenth-century textual culture and lay piety.

The contribution by Cré also focuses on a fifteenth-century vernacular manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian MS 505, which provides valuable evidence of fifteenth-century textual diversity. Unlike the Hopton Hall manuscript it contains two vernacular texts which are specifically addressed to a readership of enclosed religious. The discussion by Cré explores at length the intriguing juxtaposition of two texts, one of which can be read as a commentary upon the other. Indeed, a chapter of *The Chastising of God's Children* can be read as a critique of some of the contentious theological statements found in some parts of *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, a text that, in its French garb, was considered heretical, although this point may not have been known to those who read the Middle English version. So, how can one make sense of the company those two texts keep in this manuscript? One other way of reading these two texts in this particular manuscript context is to view the radical material of *The Mirror* and its echoes in the second text as an instance of elaborate *probatio* and *discretio*, which Cré defines as 'the correct assessment of one's own and other people's spiritual experiences'.

Gillespie, in his 'The haunted text: reflections in *The Mirror to Deuout People*', makes a case for the significance of primary readership in understanding the rationale behind the production of devotional texts. *The Mirror* is preserved in two copies from around 1450, therefore several decades after the Arundel decrees of