THORLAC
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READING

MIDDLE

ENGLISH

LITERATURE

Reading Middle English Literature
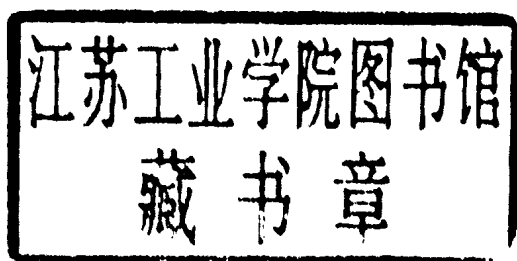
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Blackwell
Publishing

Preface

Texts that are included in full in *A Book of Middle English* (*BOME*) are quoted from there. They are: *Sir Orfeo, Patience, St Erkenwald,* Trevisa's *Dialogue between a Lord and a Clerk,* selected Rawlinson, Harley and Grimestone lyrics, the York Play of the Crucifixion and Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls.* Other texts are quoted from the editions cited in the bibliography, revised on the same principles as used in *BOME:* that is to say, the distribution of u/v and i/j has been modernized, punctuation and capitalization have been supplied or altered, and abbreviations have been expanded. The editions used are listed in the bibliography by editor, with a cross-reference from the title of the text to the edition. Bella Millett kindly supplied me with the references to her forthcoming edition of *Ancrene Wisse.*

Pages 103–8 are revised from an article published in *Studies in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Texts in Honour of John Scattergood,* eds. Anne Marie D'Arcy and Alan J. Fletcher (Dublin, 2005), 362–74.

I am indebted to many friends, colleagues and students for their comments and discussions, and I am particularly grateful to John Burrow, Janette Dillon, Ralph Hanna and Nicola Royan for their advice so generously given.

T.T-P.

Abbreviations

ANTS	Anglo-Norman Text Society
AV	Authorized Version of the Bible
BL	British Library
BOME	*A Book of Middle English*, eds. J. A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre (3rd edn., Oxford, 2005)
CA	Gower's *Confessio Amantis*
CT	Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*
EETS	Early English Text Society (e.s. = Extra Series; s.s. = Supplementary Series)
f.	folio
ME	Middle English
MED	*Middle English Dictionary*
OE	Old English
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
OF	Old French
ON	Old Norse
r	recto
v	verso

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Introduction

If this book has anything so grand as an argument, it is that Middle English literature is much more accessible than many people suppose. Here I am not thinking so much of the language, for certainly there are works such as Laʒamon's *Brut* and *Pearl* that demand a good understanding of their dialect and vocabulary if a reader is to respond to them fully. I am instead referring to the culture, the ways in which texts speak in voices to which we can relate and of matters that reflect our own concerns and interests.

There are many myths about the Middle Ages that serve, and indeed may be intended to serve, to distance medieval literature from the modern reader. For example, it has been said that in the Middle Ages there was no true concept of childhood: children were seen as miniature adults, and parents were so inured to high infant mortality that they wasted no time grieving. To dispel that misconception, read a father's inconsolable grief for his baby daughter in *Pearl*. It has been said that marriage in the Middle Ages was never anything other than a business arrangement, the wife no more than a piece of property to her husband. To put paid to that error, read the tender expressions of love between husband and wife in *Sir Orfeo*. It has been said that there was no sense of England as a nation, and no concept of the nation's history. To correct such a false notion, read *St Erkenwald* with its vivid account of the early days of the English church. These and other myths can easily be shown, and have long been shown, to be quite untrue, yet they are still purveyed by those working on later periods who understandably want to present their chosen field as the age in which modern concepts of this or that began to emerge.

If our starting point is that those who lived 700 years ago were not Martians but people whose social practices and cultural attitudes were the earlier forms of the attitudes and practices of modern western societies, then we shall be in a good position to measure and analyse the differences. Some concepts have not travelled well through time: the chivalric ethos is one example, with its knightly codes of conduct, its emphasis on honour and shame, its glorification of battle. But then even medieval commentators often complained that the ideal was by their time disregarded: Christ 'showed through his chivalric behaviour that he was worthy to be loved, as knights were *once* accustomed to do', writes the author of *Ancrene Wisse* as early as the thirteenth century, and a satirical writer of the early fourteenth century complains that knights whose duty it is to fight for Holy Church 'are now lions in hall and hares in the field'. A second area of change is in religious beliefs and observances, even though many of the rituals and practices survived in recognisable form until the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s and beyond. There is change, too, in the language situation: throughout much of the Middle Ages, although the majority spoke only English, the social elite spoke and read two vernaculars and the educated knew Latin as well. In modern Britain and the United States this position is reversed, for now elite culture is monoglot while more recent immigrant populations are multilingual. All these are significant differences between the Middle Ages and today, but the change that demands the greatest stretch of our imagination is in the means of publication, which is a consequence of new technology at the end of the Middle Ages and then again in the last thirty years. Before the invention of printing, every text had to be copied individually with great effort and expense. We have to think ourselves back to a time before there were multiple, and now infinite, identical copies of each work, to a time when vernacular texts in particular would be difficult to obtain and immensely expensive to own, when two copies of the 'same' work would look quite different and might actually vary extensively in readings, dialect, punctuation, verse-order, and in short in most of the indicators that we would take to constitute the sameness of the two texts.

Another potent myth about the Middle Ages is inherent in the term 'Middle Ages'. It evokes a time between more vibrant times, the Classical Age and the Renaissance, a time when culture was static,

monolithic, stagnant, unconsciously waiting for the rebirth. In presenting, as I do, the literature by themes rather than chronology, there is thus a danger of obscuring the massive cultural changes during the 400 years covered by this book. In just the fourteenth century a series of calamities had profound economic and social consequences reflected in the literature: the years of famine early in the century; the war with France from the 1340s onwards; repeated outbreaks of plague from 1348; the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. And yet the distinction between the free man and the bondman, lord and peasant, remained, perceived as a fundamental class-divider even though in reality the barriers between them had become much more permeable. During the fourteenth century, again, criticism of the church and of clerics became more vociferous, reaching the point of heresy with Wycliffe and the Lollards. But Lollardy did not in the end capture the hearts of those in power, and it remained a popular movement only. So, too, though love is always with us, ways of writing about it were powerfully influenced from the later thirteenth century by French romances and lyric poetry. Society; piety; love: these and other themes occupy the following chapters. However, the first chapter is essentially chronological, tracing the fortunes of English as a cultural medium in relationship with Latin and Anglo-Norman. This chapter will set the scene for a period of profound and pervasive change.

At the centre of this book is a close reading of a fairly small selection of texts. Though I have ranged more widely when appropriate, I have been keen to keep this study within bounds and also to avoid too many generalizations, so I have concentrated on the selection of poetry and prose in *A Book of Middle English*. These texts range in date from the mid-twelfth to the early fifteenth centuries, and cover a wide variety of subjects and genres. Furthermore, many of them will already be known to some readers, and all are easily available for those who do not know them, so that my analyses can be assessed with immediate reference to the texts. The last two chapters will offer wider discussions of longer works presented in extract in *A Book of Middle English (BOME)*.

This book can make no claim to be comprehensive, but comprehensiveness should be the aim of the encyclopedia, not the literary history. The concentration on a selection of texts allows room for the coupling of less habitual bedfellows: to look at *Pearl* with the Prioress's

Tale, which are paired surprisingly rarely, I think: to put the *Peterborough Chronicle* side by side with *Sir Orfeo* even though the fairy king might call them 'a sory couple'.

A disadvantage of working by topic rather than by text is that each discussion inevitably focuses on one aspect of the work. When, for example, the ploughing of Piers' half-acre is analysed in a chapter about 'society', what *Piers Plowman* has to say about love is neglected; when Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* is discussed in a chapter on 'love', its social commentary is ignored. I have tried to compensate for this by including briefer accounts of such multi-faceted works in more than one section. I hope that this approach will show clearly how medieval writers reflected the debates and preoccupations of their culture, how they participated in them and how they shaped the forms in which to express them.

The Use of English

Three Languages

What were the effects of the Norman Conquest upon the English language? A century and a half after the battle of Hastings, a scribe copied a celebration of the glories of Anglo-Saxon learning, the *First Worcester Fragment*, beginning 'Sanctus Beda was iboren her on Breotene mid us' – 'Saint Bede was born here among us in Britain.' The poet listed the bishops from the seventh century to the eleventh, 'by whom our people were taught in English' and who 'disseminated (*bodeden*) the Christian faith', continuing:

> Þeos lærden ure leodan on Englisc;
> Næs deorc heore liht ac hit fære glod.
> Nu is þeo leore forleten and þet folc is forloren;
> Nu beoþ oþre leoden þeo læreþ ure folc
> And feole of þen lorþeines losiæþ and þet folc forþ mid.   (15–18)

> [These taught our people in English; their light was not dark but glowed brightly. Now the learning has been abandoned and the people lost; now there are other men who teach our people, and many of the teachers are damned and the people with them.]

The scribe of this lament is known affectionately as 'the tremulous Worcester hand', and his shaky writing can be seen in several manuscripts that came from Worcester Cathedral Library, copying, glossing and interpreting the Old English that he evidently had some difficulty in understanding (Franzen 1991; Brehe 1990).

How much truth is there in this lament? The Anglo-Saxon achievements in learning and literature were undeniably distinguished, and their passing a justified cause of regret. Such an early and substantial tradition of vernacular writings is without parallel in Europe. The Anglo-Saxon church had a proud history going back to the Conversion, its earliest days recorded by Bede and its later developments charted by other historians, such as the monk Eadmer at Canterbury shortly after the Conquest writing Latin lives of saints. Scribes were trained to write Old English in a settled orthography based on the West-Saxon dialect, and there was a flourishing of literary activity in the years around 1000, with the copying of all the important codices of Old English poetry, and the compositions of those masters of English prose, Ælfric and Wulfstan. Within a decade of the Conquest the only English-born bishop left was – significantly – the bishop of Worcester, who had been elected in 1062; the others were all foreigners. The majority of English lordships had been taken over by Normans. English had been replaced by Latin as the language of learning and the language of record. Though works of prose writers such as Ælfric continued to be copied and studied, the distinctive Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition had disappeared or, to be precise, had been replaced by a thin stream of half-verse, half-prose, of which this Worcester lament is a fair representative.

The writer's gloom is easy to understand, for there was a great deal to be gloomy about. There were very obvious losses in the transition from Anglo-Saxon to Norman. The gains were less visible, but yet the English language survived very well in the mouths of the great majority of the people of England. There was never the remotest possibility that English would die. It was developing in ways that were to have profound long-term effects, and this scrap of verse already records one such development. Ironically in view of the writer's devotion to English, its vocabulary includes loan-words: writing Bede 'unravelled the knotty problems called *questiuns*' (4), he introduces a technical word from Latin, perhaps via French, as a philosophical term alluding to Bede's collections of *Quaestiones*; the last word of the poem is *feþ*, 'faith', a word introduced by the Normans in the form of their own dialect of French. Though there were no longer scribes trained to write according to the traditional standard based on West-Saxon, it was a formal version of English that never represented closely the spoken language, and later scribes instead represented English as it

developed in various regions in different ways, some dialects more conservative than others, some more influenced by the Old Norse of the Viking settlers, some more receptive to Norman French.

But why are these early developments so little visible? Part of the answer is illustrated by the Worcester lament, surviving only in a fragmentary manuscript that was cut up in the fifteenth century as scrap to be used in bindings for the books in the Worcester Cathedral Library. Manuscripts survive by chance; the losses, particularly from the early Middle English period, were enormous (Wilson 1970).

The other part of the answer is that after the Conquest English was the least prestigious of England's three main languages. Before the Conquest, English co-existed with Latin, the language of the Universal Church; after 1066 it competed with an alternative vernacular, Norman French, which in England developed its own features as Anglo-Norman. The Normans represented a relatively small proportion of the population, but since they had power in their hands their language came to have a disproportionate impact upon society. To begin with, the language situation was often simple enough: mutual incomprehension. 'The Normans say that the English are barking because they can't understand their speech', wrote Wace in his account of the battle of Hastings (Crane 1999, 36). But this situation could not last long, as Norman lords married ladies whose first language was English, employed English bailiffs with whom they needed to communicate in one language or the other if their estates were to be run effectively, and generally made themselves at home culturally as well as physically, switching from French wine to English beer, according to Reginald of Canterbury (Rigg 1992, 11). By 1176, as a result of intermarriage, Richard Fitz Neal considered it difficult to distinguish between freemen of English and Norman birth (*Dialogus de Scaccario*, ed. Johnson 1983, 53). He makes it clear, though, that he is referring to freemen, not to the majority of the population, the peasants.

The Normans traced their ancestry to Viking settlers in Normandy, who had given up Norse and adopted French manners. They showed the same ability to adapt in their new home, taking over the institutions and organizational structures of Anglo-Saxon society, and becoming bilingual, just as the English who had direct contact with them also had to do. It needs to be emphasized here that England was at some levels a multilingual community, above all in the twelfth century (Short 1991). The point is made by Walter Map's praise of

Gilbert Foliot, abbot of Gloucester, bishop of London (1163–87) and enemy of Thomas Becket, as 'a man most accomplished in the three languages, Latin, French and English, and eloquent and clear in each of them' (Bartlett 2000, 502–3).

The question of how long Anglo-Norman continued to be the first language of the conquerors cannot be answered in that form. Some Normans who intermarried must have been speaking English as a first language within a generation or two. Others who had estates across the Channel would have considered themselves as people of a Norman and Angevin realm rather than specifically English, until Normandy was lost to France in 1204, at which point they had to choose to commit themselves to one nation or the other. The aristocrats attached to the court, and those who, like a succession of English kings, took wives from the Continent, continued to speak French to some degree into the fourteenth century (Rothwell 1976).

Where English suffered long-term eclipse was as a written language. In this field it had to establish a role side by side with Latin and French. Shortly after the Conquest, royal documents ceased to be written in English and the Normans adopted Latin, probably because they neither understood English nor had their own tradition of writing documents in the vernacular. The most famous and extraordinary example of such a Latin document is Domesday Book of 1086. At first Latin was shared across a society divided by two vernaculars. Not until the mid-thirteenth century does it become at all usual to use French for official documents, and not until the early fifteenth century does English begin to make regular appearance as a language of official record (Clanchy 1993, 215–23). Neither French nor English ever entirely displaced Latin, which continued in documentary use right through the Middle Ages.

Latin had always been the language of monastic learning, particularly for writings aimed at a wider European readership. As English lost its position, so Latin increased its hold as the learned language. The range of writings in Latin is extraordinarily wide (Rigg 1992). In the reign of Henry II (1154–89), to take just one period of great activity, Latin authors, some serving as court officials or associated with the court in looser ways, achieved distinction in a variety of fields, and often influenced later writers in English (Clanchy 1983, 162–79). We must remember in this connection that the Angevin empire, ruled by the 'English' king and his queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, included

all of western France from Normandy in the north to Gascony in the south. It was a truly international and constantly peripatetic court, and many royal servants were not English in any narrow sense. Ailred of Rievaulx, however, was English, the son of an English priest (at a time when clerical marriage was not uncommon), who had started his career in the Scottish court, and joined the Cistercian order at the Yorkshire abbey of Rievaulx in 1132. His history, *Genealogia Regum Anglorum* (1152–3), was dedicated to the future Henry II, celebrating the union of the Norman and Anglo-Saxon royal lines that Henry represented, an idea Ailred expanded in the 1160s in his life of the last Anglo-Saxon king, Edward the Confessor (Clanchy 1983, 56). Ailred wrote a guide to the life of an anchoress, *De Institutione Inclusarum*, 'as seint Ailred þe abbat wrat to his suster', says the author of *Ancrene Wisse* (6.285), who drew on Ailred's book. It is a reminder that Latin was not solely the preserve of men. John of Salisbury (d. 1180), who was present at the murder of his friend Thomas Becket, served as a diplomat and later became bishop of Chartres. He wrote lives of Becket and of Anselm, the *Policraticus* on political theory, and the *Metalogicon* (1159) attacking the decline of learning. Closer to Henry II was Richard Fitz Neal, the king's treasurer and bishop of London, who wrote a guide to the exchequer in the form of a dialogue, the *Dialogus de Scaccario* (1176–7), cited above. Another royal servant was Ralph Glanvill, Henry II's chief judicial officer, who gave his name to a treatise on the laws and customs of England (1187–9). Though he was not actually its author, the work is intimately associated with the court. The *Speculum Stultorum*, 'Mirror of Fools', written in 1179–80 by Nigel Wireker, satirized the foolishness of society through the adventures of the donkey Burnellus. John Gower used it and it was cited as 'Daun Burnel the Asse' by Chaucer's smart fox in the Nun's Priest's Tale (*CT* VII.3312). In the 1180s Walter Map was the author of another satirical work, *De Nugis Curialium*, 'Courtiers' Trifles', a loosely organized collection of wild and wonderful stories, several of Celtic origin, including a version of the *Sir Orfeo* plot, a tale of the wife of a knight of 'Little Britain', that is, Brittany. A probable source of animal lore in *The Owl and the Nightingale* was Alexander Neckam (1157–1217), a considerable encyclopedist, whose *De Naturis Rerum*, 'The Nature of Things', was widely known. Finally, Joseph of Exeter wrote an epic poem on the Trojan War, the *Ylias* (c. 1185), indebted to classical and post-classical authors, in particular to the Roman poet