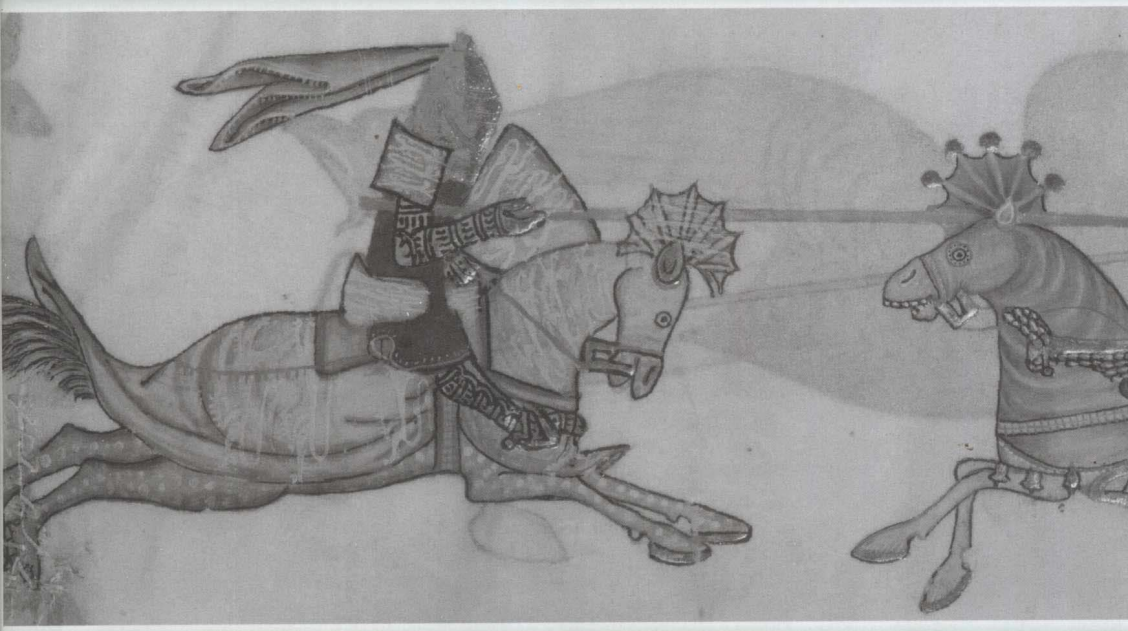
A Concise Companion to

MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

Edited by Marilyn Corrie



A Concise Companion to Middle English Literature

Edited by Marilyn Corrie

WILEY-BLACKWELL
A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2009

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services, and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book please see our website at www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A concise companion to Middle English literature / edited by Marilyn Corrie.
p. cm. — (Blackwell concise companions to literature and culture)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4051-2004-3 (alk. paper)
1. English literature—Middle English, 1100-1500—History and criticism.
2. Great Britain—Civilization—1066-1485. I. Corrie, Marilyn.
PR260.C665 2009
820.9'001—dc22

2008044519

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/12.5pt Meridien by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed in the United Kingdom

1 2009

List of Contributors

Helen Barr is Fellow and Tutor in English at Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford, where she teaches Old and Middle English literature, the history of the English language, and Shakespeare. Her books include *Signes and Sothe: Language in the Piers Plowman Tradition* (D.S. Brewer, 1994) and *Socioliterary Practice in Late-Medieval England* (Oxford University Press, 2002). Her primary research interest is in relationships between textualities and cultural practices.

Helen Cooper is Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at the University of Cambridge. Her books include *The Canterbury Tales* in the Oxford Guides to Chaucer series and *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

Marilyn Corrie is a lecturer in English at University College London. She has published essays on early Middle English literature and manuscripts, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, and the history of the English language in the medieval period. She is currently writing a book about Malory's *Morte Darthur* and religion in the late Middle Ages.

Andrew Galloway has taught in Cornell University's English Department since receiving his PhD (UC Berkeley) in 1991. He has written numerous essays on Middle English poetry, especially that of

Chaucer, Gower and Langland, and on medieval chronicles. Recently he completed *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman: Volume One* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) and *Medieval Literature and Culture* (Continuum Press, 2007).

Alexandra Gillespie is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Toronto. She specializes in medieval and early Tudor literature and book history, and is the author of *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and Their Books, 1473–1557* (Oxford University Press, 2006), and the editor of *John Stow (1525–1605) and the Making of the English Past* (British Library, 2004) and a special issue of *Huntington Library Quarterly, Manuscript, Print, and Early Tudor Literature* (2004).

Jane Griffiths is a lecturer in English at the University of Bristol. Her book *John Skelton and Poetic Authority: Defining the Liberty to Speak* was published by Oxford University Press in 2006, and she has also published essays on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English poetry and poetics in *Huntington Library Quarterly, Mediaevalia & Humanistica, Renaissance Studies* and *The Yearbook of English Studies.*

David Matthews is a lecturer in Middle English at the University of Manchester. He is the author of *The Making of Middle English 1765–1910* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Recently, he has co-edited *Medieval Cultural Studies* (with Ruth Evans and Helen Fulton) (2006) and *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England* (with Gordon McMullan) (Cambridge University Press, 2007). He is currently working on political verse of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Catherine Sanok teaches in the English Department at the University of Michigan. She is the author of *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Her essays on Middle English literature have appeared in *Exemplaria, Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies, New Medieval Literatures* and *Studies in the Age of Chaucer.*

Jeremy J. Smith is Professor of English Philology at the University of Glasgow. His publications include *An Historical Study of English* (Routledge, 1996), *Essentials of Early English* (Routledge, 2005, 2nd edn) and *Sound Change and the History of English* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Daniel Wakelin is a lecturer in English at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Christ's College. He has published a book on *Humanism, Reading and English Literature 1430–1530* (Oxford University Press, 2007) and articles on Middle English manuscripts, the history of reading, carols and early Tudor writing. His current research concerns corrections and correctness in Middle English books and literature.

Barry Windeatt is Professor of English at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Emmanuel College. His books include a parallel-text edition of *Troilus and Criseyde* (Longman, 1984) and a Penguin Classics edition of Chaucer's poem (2003); the Oxford Guides to Chaucer critical introduction to *Troilus and Criseyde* (1992); an annotated edition of *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Longman, 2000) together with a Penguin Classics translation (1985); and also an edition of *English Mystics of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 1994). He has created the 'Medieval Imaginations' website of images of medieval English visual culture (http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/medieval/) and is writing a study of text and image in later medieval England.

Acknowledgements

I would like, first and foremost, to thank all of the contributors for their tolerance of my often considerable demands, and for their patience in waiting for the book to appear in print. I would especially like to thank Andrew Galloway for his help and encouragement from the inception of the project to its very last stages.

A number of my colleagues in the English Department at University College London have helped me in a variety of ways. I am very grateful for advice provided by Rosemary Ashton, John Mullan and Henry Woudhuysen, and for the continuous help and encouragement of Susan Irvine. I could not have completed the project without the kindness and support of Neil Rennie. Anita Garfoot sorted out many issues that I was unable to sort out myself. I would also like to thank Nicola McDonald at York, Francis O'Gorman at Leeds, Corinne Saunders at Durham and Marion Turner at Oxford for invaluable assistance with different aspects of the book. Thorlac Turville-Petre gave generous and useful feedback at an early stage; Elisabeth Dutton and Christina von Nolcken provided crucial and greatly appreciated help much later in the day. Emma Bennett at Wiley-Blackwell has been a kind and astute editor, and I have benefited too from the expertise and patience of Annette Abel and Sue Leigh. Lastly, I would like to thank my friends for both practical help and moral support. I am especially grateful to Emma Barker, Georgia Brown, Gordon McMullan and Melanie Mauthner,

and to Clarence Liu and the Barbican, London for providing ideal working conditions.

Much of the research for Daniel Wakelin's chapter was conducted with the aid of a Francis Bacon Foundation Scholarship at the Huntington Library, San Marino in 2006.

Contents

Introduction

It has become fashionable for literary studies to blur the boundaries that have traditionally been used to distinguish one period of literature from another. Scholars of medieval literature have explored both the transmission of Old English literature in the period of Middle English and its study in the Middle English period by people who could no longer read it with ease (see, for example, Franzen 1991). More recently scholars have blurred the boundaries between the Middle English and the 'early modern' periods, examining the transmission and presentation of the writings of late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English authors – especially Chaucer and Lydgate – in the sixteenth century, after printing had become firmly established (Gillespie 2006), or the continuing interest in medieval romances as late as the early seventeenth century (Cooper 2004). Interests and ideas that have been thought to be new in the early modern period have also been discerned in writing and in manuscripts that were produced in the fifteenth century (Strohm 2005; Wakelin 2007). As David Matthews discusses in this volume, recent literary histories that treat the medieval period have chosen as their starting point the mid-fourteenth century, and have continued their surveys well into the sixteenth century – or have begun their surveys in the Old English period and continued them up to the mid-fourteenth century. There are reasons for splitting the period of Middle English in two, as such surveys do: in particular – as has long been recognized – it is in the second half of the fourteenth century that the English language

becomes widely used for great literary writing, including the works of Chaucer (and William Langland's great dream vision poem *Piers Plowman*, John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the other works in the manuscript in which that poem has been preserved). But there are reasons too for preserving the traditional 'fence' placed around the Middle English period, usually loosely defined as the centuries between 1100 and 1500. Those reasons are the subject of this book.

The subjects covered in the various chapters of the volume, which are by different authors, have been chosen with a view to elucidating issues that are likely to be unfamiliar to people approaching Middle English literature for the first time, or who have only limited experience of that literature. Those issues need to be appreciated if Middle English texts are to be understood on their own terms. At the same time, each of the chapters offers new insights on its subject, and the contributors consider material that will be unfamiliar even to experts in Middle English literature, or look at more familiar material from new perspectives. This is a book, therefore, for more advanced readers of Middle English texts as well as new ones.

Chaucer, the best-known Middle English author, figures prominently in the volume as a whole, and is discussed in detail in many of its essays. But Chaucer's writings are considered in the context, and the light, of other writing of the period: an approach that enables readers to appreciate both how Chaucer is typical of the age in which he was writing and, in a number of important respects, how he departs from, and sometimes implicitly queries, many of the conventions of writing in the Middle English period (see in particular the essays by Catherine Sanok, Andrew Galloway, Alexandra Gillespie, Jane Griffiths, Helen Cooper and Helen Barr; compare also Daniel Wakelin's and David Matthews' chapters).

The book is, first and foremost, about Middle English literature – but several of the subjects with which it deals also inform medieval literature in languages other than English. I have grouped those subjects of which this is especially true at the start of the volume, under the title 'Key Contexts'. The chapters here consider such issues as the compulsion to read symbolic significance into the phenomena of this world in the Middle Ages, evidenced, as Barry Windeatt discusses, in Middle English writers ranging from the female visionaries Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich to Sir Thomas Malory, the author of *Le Morte Darthur*, as well as in the Middle Scots writer Robert Henryson; the responses of medieval people to the religious beliefs that

they were taught to hold, scriptural, doctrinal and otherwise, exemplified strikingly, but far from exclusively, in writing by the *Gawain*-poet and Langland; ideas about women in the Middle Ages, which infuse writing both by men and by women themselves, and which are one of the most conspicuous ways in which Chaucer engages with debates that were, by his day, traditional (although they remained current); and thinking about the past in the period, which was regularly seen, especially, not as something separate from the present, but as something that was, in fact, inseparable from it, as was apparent to the anonymous playwrights of the mystery cycles that were performed in prosperous English towns in the late Middle Ages, amongst other people. There is an important exception to the applicability of the points made in this part of the book not just to Middle English literature but to medieval literature more generally, and that concerns the response to religious teaching that prevails in Middle English literature in the fifteenth century. This is the product of circumstances that were particular to England, the result of the backlash of the Church in England and the English state towards teaching that had already been branded heretical. Discussion of this issue is included in the second chapter of the book, on 'Religious Belief'.

The second group of chapters discusses issues that distinguish the production of Middle English literature from the production of writing in other periods. The first of the chapters in this part considers the contexts in which Middle English literature was both produced and disseminated – orally and in writing, in (and from) religious milieux, especially monasteries, and secular milieux too, including the royal court, aristocratic households and, late in the period, the environment of the administrative centre of England at Westminster and the adjacent city of London. The second of the chapters discusses the engagement of Middle English literature – including, again, Chaucer's writings – with the distinctive medieval ideas surrounding the role of an author in the production of a text. By the end of the medieval period something resembling many of the ideas about authorship that prevail today had emerged; and yet even then traditional medieval thinking about authorship can be seen to linger in the ways that the authors of texts represent themselves.

The third part of the book covers subjects that are of particular relevance to writing in England in the medieval period. The first chapter here discusses the features of the Middle English phase of the English language. As Jeremy Smith points out in the chapter, it is to nineteenth-century historians of the English language that we owe the

term 'Middle English'; they perceived that between the Norman Conquest of 1066 and the introduction of printing technology to England in 1476, English showed certain characteristics that set it apart from Old English on the one hand and early modern English on the other. The chapter explores what the characteristics of Middle English are, and how they are related to the functions that English performed in the years between the Conquest and its début in print. The second chapter in the section discusses the fact that a great deal of the Middle English literature that survives to us, from religious treatises to romances, is translated or adapted from writing in other languages, particularly French and Latin. Chaucer's works show a conspicuous and recurring interest in the issue of translation, and a more sophisticated attitude towards its practice than his famous branding as a 'grant translateur' by one of his French contemporaries may suggest. In the final chapter of the section, the historical 'background' to Middle English writing is discussed, and particularly the specific events in England and concerning England with which that writing engages. Middle English texts are vehicles – sometimes the only vehicles we have – for telling us about those events, and yet, as Helen Barr explains in the chapter, their presentation of them is far from objective: if Middle English literature is informed by certain events, it also 'produces' those events in various ways when it gives them textual shape.

The final part of the book addresses issues relating to the ways in which Middle English literature is perceived in the present day. The chapter 'Manuscripts and Modern Editions' discusses how the media in which Middle English literature is usually read now change the experience of reading it in important ways from the experience that people in the Middle Ages would have had when they read it. Modern printed editions of Middle English texts both add things to the manuscript forms in which Middle English texts circulated in the Middle Ages and take things away, and it is essential to be aware of the changes that they impose on the texts if we are to have a sense of the distinctive ways in which they were read, and the ways in which they circulated, in the Middle Ages. The book concludes by discussing how present-day perceptions of Middle English literature have been shaped by the changing ways in which it has been thought about and commented on since the Middle Ages. The chapter also ponders the future of Middle English literature, suggesting the appeal of its 'difference' from the literature of other periods and regretting some aspects of the current trends in academic scholarship that obscure that difference.

If the book deals with issues that define the distinctiveness of Middle English literature, it does not obscure heterogeneity in approaches to those issues amongst writers of the period, nor changes and developments across the four hundred years in which the literature was produced. The essays draw attention, for example, to the rise of the concept of 'poesye' in the late fourteenth century (see Andrew Galloway's chapter); the changes in the dissemination of Middle English texts that took place at around the same time (see Alexandra Gillespie's chapter); the appearance in Middle English writing of the late fourteenth century of new ideas relating to the role played by an author in the production of a text (see Jane Griffiths' essay); and new attitudes towards the copying and the presentation of Middle English texts in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (see Daniel Wakelin's chapter). Within the world of writing and the copying of that writing in England, various changes were taking place more or less simultaneously around the end of the fourteenth century, a parallel to the many changes that were taking place in the wider world at the same time (compare, for example, Staley 1996; see also my own chapter and Helen Barr's below).

It will have been evident from the above summary of the subjects covered by the book that, within the concise format necessitated by the demands of the *Concise Companion* series, the volume aims to provide a comprehensive (if not, of course, exhaustive) guide to the study of Middle English literature; it can also, however, be dipped into for consultation on specific topics. Each of the chapters aims to offer comprehensive coverage of its particular subject, again within a concise format. In all of the essays, contextual information about the subject that is being addressed is combined with the critical (or linguistic) analysis of a range of texts. The aim of the volume as a whole, then, is to offer a guide to its subject that is both useful and illuminating. If it is a concise companion to Middle English literature, it hopes, nonetheless, to be an authoritative and a stimulating one.

References

Cooper, Helen (2004). *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Franzen, Christine (1991). *The Tremulous Hand of Worcester: A Study of Old English in the Thirteenth Century*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Gillespie, Alexandra (2006). *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and Their Books, 1473–1557*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Staley, Lynn (1996). 'Julian of Norwich and the Late Fourteenth-Century Crisis of Authority'. In David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (pp. 107–78). University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Strohm, Paul (2005). *Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Wakelin, Daniel (2007). *Humanism, Reading, and English Literature 1430–1530*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Notes on the contents of bibliographies; references; and abbreviations

The bibliography at the end of each chapter is divided into two sections: 'Primary texts' and 'Secondary sources and suggestions for further reading'. Primary texts are generally listed under the names of the editors whose versions of the texts the contributors have used; references within the text of each essay specify whose edition has been consulted. The possibility of including extensive bibliographies for each subject has been precluded by the demands of the *Concise Companion* series; where they have thought it appropriate, the contributors have, however, added some titles to the list of works that they reference within their chapters in order to indicate reading that they consider essential to their topic.

Quotations from Chaucer's works have been taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) unless stated otherwise; the line numbering of *The Riverside Chaucer* has also been used in the essays. References to quotations from *The Canterbury Tales* (or *CT*) are to the number of the fragment from which the quotation is taken, followed by the line numbering within the fragment, again as identified in *The Riverside Chaucer*. References to editions of texts and quotations from editions are given in the form (for example) '(ed. Vinaver 1990)' and '(ed. Vinaver 1990: 850)' respectively; references in the form (for example) '(Vinaver, ed., 1990: 10)' are to a statement made, or material contained in, an edition that is not part of the edited text itself. Unless otherwise indicated, references are to page numbers in the specified works. Italics in quotations identify material expanded from abbreviations in manuscripts, or material underlined in manuscripts; square brackets identify material supplied by editors or contributors themselves.

'EETS' stands for the Early English Text Society; 'OS' stands for the Ordinary Series of volumes within the publications of the Society, 'ES' for the Extra Series, and 'SS' for the Supplementary Series.

Part I

Key Contexts