

Edited by
MARION TURNER



A Handbook of
**Middle English
Studies**

A Handbook of
Middle English Studies

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For Cecilia and Peter

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Abbreviations

<i>BD</i>	Geoffrey Chaucer, <i>The Book of the Duchess</i> , in <i>The Riverside Chaucer: Reissued with a New Foreword by Christopher Cannon</i> , 3rd edition, ed. Larry Benson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
<i>Canterbury Tales</i>	Geoffrey Chaucer, <i>The Canterbury Tales</i> , in <i>The Riverside Chaucer</i> . Citations are by fragment and line number.
<i>Confessions</i>	St Augustine, <i>Confessions</i> , trans. Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Citations are by book, chapter, and paragraph.
<i>HF</i>	Geoffrey Chaucer, <i>The House of Fame</i> , in <i>The Riverside Chaucer</i> .
<i>Pearl</i>	<i>Pearl</i> , in <i>The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript</i> , 4th edition, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002.
<i>PF</i>	Geoffrey Chaucer, <i>The Parliament of Fowls</i> , in <i>The Riverside Chaucer</i> .
<i>PLGW</i>	Geoffrey Chaucer, <i>The Prologue to the Legend of Good Women</i> , in <i>The Riverside Chaucer</i> .
<i>PP</i>	William Langland, <i>The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B Text</i> , 2nd edition, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt. London: J. M. Dent, 1995.
<i>SGGK</i>	<i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> , in <i>The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript</i> , 4th edition, ed. Andrew and Waldron.
<i>TC</i>	Geoffrey Chaucer, <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i> , in <i>The Riverside Chaucer</i> .

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Introduction

Marion Turner

There is no neutral or innocent reading of a work of art.

Terry Eagleton

Theory and Medieval Literature

At the end of Chaucer's most experimental and dazzling poem, *The House of Fame*, in an astonishing literalization of the death of the author, texts ("tydings") come to life, speak to each other, morph, and construct new identities beyond the control of the person who spoke or wrote them (ll. 2075–2120). The playfulness of this scene, in which texts flaunt their independence in an imaginary and liberated world, is the climax of an exceptionally original poem, where local gossip is as worthy of attention as classical poetry, where authors are exposed as prejudiced readers themselves, where the gendered bias of dominant narratives is foregrounded.¹ The poem, in part a meditation on where poetry comes from, what it is, and what it means, tells us that authors do not make poetry in an ivory tower; instead, each text is a *bricolage*, an opportunist mosaic jumbled together from different points of origin, a tissue of quotations, a place where different sources blend and clash (Barthes 1324).² Most importantly: it is readers, however unsatisfactory they might be, who make meaning. Monolithic readings, single interpretation, excessive respect for authors, are deadly; to bring life to our readings and our writings we must embrace the diversity of the textual world, and remain open to multiplicity in what we read and what we think. *HF* itself invites and encourages us to exert pressure on the text from the outside, to be active readers, to think theoretically about the literary text and about how we interpret.

In his earliest surviving narrative poem, *The Book of the Duchess* (c.1370), Chaucer presents us with an extreme version of a biased reader. The dreamer reads the Ovidian story of Ceyx and Alcyone, a tragic tale in which Alcyone mourns the loss of her husband at sea, is visited by the god of sleep and shown Ceyx's dead body, and then dies herself, wretchedly (ll. 62–214). He does not bother to read the end of the story – in which the lovers are reunited after death. Instead, he focuses on the fact that there is a god of sleep, as he himself is an insomniac, desperate to collapse onto his pillow (ll. 231–269). In a comic parody of a bad reader, the dreamer/narrator ostentatiously reads for himself, only taking that from the story which relates directly to his own experience. On the one hand, this is a warning: we should all try to be more open-minded, to listen to what texts have to say to us rather than remaining locked in our own prejudices. But there is an extent to which this reader shows us what we all *inevitably* do: each reader brings her or his own interpretation to each text because everyone's personal and literary experiences are different. And even each individual reader changes all the time and finds different things in texts at different moments (the narrator of the *BD* might read the story in another way on a day when he was not so tired). Hence the same reading can never be duplicated, no one can step into the same river twice. Chaucer shows us this over and over again: the tale-collection conceit allows him to encode similar examples of biased reading through the pilgrims' responses to the *Canterbury Tales*.

With their overwhelming focus on what we might term Bakhtinian polyphony and Barthesian reader-response, Chaucer's texts obviously open themselves up to diverse modes of interpretation. Other medieval texts are similarly self-conscious and implicitly theoretical: in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain is a hilarious and wonderful example of a literary character who knows he is a literary character: when Gawain arrives at Hautdesert, all the inhabitants have been reading romances and Gawain is constantly faced with the challenge of living up to his literary identity. When faced with disappointed comments along the lines of "Are you really Gawain?" "Can you be Gawain?" (e.g. ll. 1293, 1481), rather than asserting his selfhood, he tries hard to be more like the man about whom they have read. The literary playfulness of all these poems encourages us to read theoretically.

But theory does more than respond to the invitations of a text; its position *beyond* the text is crucial. Theory, in productive relationship with texts, can act as a catalyst, enabling dynamic reading experiences. In the present volume, for example, *HF* is read alongside modern theories of how we can experience the city, as *voyeur* and as *flâneur* (Hsy), and the relationship between the characters in *BD* is analyzed in terms drawn from neuroscience and psychoanalysis (Fradenburg). The intersubjectivity that Fradenburg discusses at length in her essay on imagination is closely aligned to Dinshaw's discussion of interconnectedness in *SGGK*, analyzed here in the context of ecocriticism, a very contemporary mode of theory that yields a rich reading of the medieval poem.

This volume makes a distinct intervention in the world of medieval literary studies. Its focus is on the interplay between theory and texts. “Theory” is here taken to mean an articulation of an approach to a text, or of a cultural perspective, taken from outside the object of enquiry. It can be classical, medieval, modern, or postmodern: Aristotle, Augustine, and Dante are theorists just as much as Derrida, Foucault, and Žižek.³ Theory helps us to open texts up and allow them to speak to us; as Paul Strohm puts it, “a text cannot fully reveal itself unless pressured by questions formed somewhere outside its own orbit of assumptions” (xiv). But an encounter between a theory and a text can go further than this; it can be a two-way, transformative process: texts can intervene in theories, prompting us to restructure our approaches, challenging our terms of inquiry. David Lawton’s essay in the present volume, for example, reworks Habermas’s ideas not only in terms of temporality but also in terms of the nature of the public sphere; Nicola McDonald throws new light on Judith Butler, drag, and performativity as well as on medieval romance; John Ganim explicitly addresses the question of how the Middle Ages changes postcolonial theory. Reading theoretically inspires unpredictable interpretative journeys.

Theory can work in many ways. It can be simply a sophisticated form of doubling, (Derrida 1692).⁴ As I suggested above, Chaucer was a Barthesian before Barthes; his texts foreground the idea that readers construct texts. One person reads a text about Troy and sees Aeneas as a hero, another sees him as a villain. These two readers – Virgil and Ovid – then construct their own texts which can also be read in myriad ways. (This is what happens in Book I of *HF*.) Using Barthes’s terminology about the dense archaeology of texts and the centrality of the reader in putting a text together (1325–1326) can help to clarify what Chaucer’s texts are already suggesting by placing them in a new framework.⁵ Theory can also expose things that the text or author is trying to suppress. Romance and fabliau, for instance, habitually use the language of love and sexual desire to express personal relationships; reading theories about the exchange of women articulated by thinkers such as Gayle Rubin makes it clear that women in patriarchal societies are less love objects for themselves than pawns in a relationship between men. In romance specifically, however much they talk the talk of true love, women’s desire tends conveniently to follow the desire of the father-figure, and thus serves the exchange of women system. Romance texts sometimes occlude this – for instance by making the hero’s social position initially unclear – but structurally, the genre demands the maintenance of family, patrimony, and social order. Hence Rimenhild’s illicit love for Horn (in the early romance, *King Horn*) actually serves her father’s desires when Horn turns out to be a very desirable son-in-law. And theory can reveal things that the text cannot know, and can open it up in a new historical moment. For instance, in Book 7 of *Ancrene Wisse*, the lady’s body is imagined as a castle, an image which recurs in many medieval texts. In the twentieth century, Jacques Lacan wrote about the persistence of this kind of imagery, discussing how the individual constructs a walled, enclosed identity for himself or herself in opposition to images of the body as fragmented, and in opposition to spatial

images of marshes and rubbish tips, which are set against the wholeness and rigidity of the castle (Lacan, in Leitch *et al.*, 1167). He discusses how this imagery functions in the development of identity, and the recurrence of such imagery in dreams and at different stages in mental development. Such theories can be applied in fruitful ways to medieval texts, in ways which help us to understand the fundamental power of the imagery of *Ancrene Wisse*, and to remember how medieval topography and metaphor continue to inhabit our collective psyche. This is an example too of the mutually illuminating relationship between theory and medieval text: twentieth and twenty-first century ideas about selfhood, love, and the mind are saturated with imagery gleaned from medieval devotional and erotic literature.

Critical Contexts

The place of theory within medieval studies has become nearly unassailable over the last twenty-five years (and also had a significant presence earlier). In 1989, a journal of theory and medieval studies (*Exemplaria*) was inaugurated; in the first issue, Fradenburg published an article explicitly dealing with the relationship between theory and Chaucer studies;⁶ in the following year, *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* devoted a special issue (13) to medieval literature (Chinca). Now, *Exemplaria* is published four times a year and the most important journals in the field – such as *New Medieval Literatures*, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, and *Speculum* – all frequently publish theoretically-oriented work. An exciting new journal, *postmedieval*, inaugurated in 2010, asserts in its mission statement that it “aims to bring the medieval and modern into productive critical relation”: 2013 issues cover topics such as “Eco-materialism,” and “The Transcultural Middle Ages.” Important books and special issues of periodicals have overtly addressed the relationship between theory and medieval literature (see, for example, *Theory and the Study of Premodernity*, special issue of *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36.1 (2006) (Clark), and Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text*); and there are many books which engage systematically and consistently with particular theoretical approaches, such as gender theories or postcolonialism (Lochrie *et al.*; Cohen). Major conferences routinely engage with a wide range of theoretical approaches. However, for nonmedievalists, or for those approaching the period for the first time, the connection between theory and medieval literature can be initially opaque. It might seem anachronistic to read medieval texts through the lens of 1960s feminism or twenty-first century theories of sovereignty. To the frustration of medievalists, two pernicious myths continue to bedevil medieval studies: the casual use of the word “medieval” to mean “violent,” “unpleasant,” “what we are not,” and the associated idea that individuality only came into existence around 1600. These misleading and profoundly unhistorical views conspire to construct an idea of medieval texts as somehow fundamentally different to later texts, resistant to the modes of interpretation that effect profitable readings of Shakespeare, or Eliot, or Woolf. If medieval culture was flatter, less

complicated, more brutish, than later cultures, its writers and readers conscious of themselves only as members of groups with no understanding of the depths of the self or of conflicted social forces, medieval texts might indeed respond less fully to diverse modes of analysis. But reading medieval literature should expose the falsity of this view of medieval culture.

We might first consider the “popular culture” view of the medieval crystallized in the 1995 film *Pulp Fiction*, where the phrase “getting medieval” stands for extreme, total violence, and “medieval” thus represents a period dominated by aggressive power relationships. While medievalists have long critiqued the use of “medieval” in the film (Dinshaw), the message bears repeating as the media, cultural commentators, and computer games still routinely use “medieval” as a shorthand for that which is violent, backward, and generally nasty. The power of the rule of law has undoubtedly changed dramatically through and after the medieval period and, in Europe, violence has become less the domain of individuals, and more the province of the state. But the atrocities of twentieth-century European history make clear the folly of labeling the medieval era as more violent, or more intolerant, than other periods. Recently, scholars have drawn attention to the construction of the medieval past as a subaltern inferior to modernity, arguing that commentators routinely employ colonial rhetoric to other the past and to exalt a supposedly enlightened present (as Mills discusses, *pace* Kathleen Davis (2008), in the present volume). The colonizing of the medieval allows a complacent forgetting of the crimes and inequalities that continue to underpin modernity.

Furthermore, terms such as ‘medieval’ or ‘modern’ are inherently problematic and gloss over the complexities of the period – whatever the “period” might be (see Matthews’s essay on Periodization in the present volume). The term “medieval” covers a long period of time and even within any particular historical moment, medieval society was far from monolithic or static. This was not a society exclusively structured by feudalism where everyone stayed in their place, but an era in which mercantilism, market forces, and trade were increasingly important, and where devastating events such as the Black Death were engines for social mobility. As with any period, any statement along the lines of “medieval people did this . . .” or “the medieval mind was like that . . .” should be viewed with skepticism.

In academic circles, the parallel misconception about the monolithic Middle Ages has been the idea that subjectivity did not exist until the early modern period. Frequently repeated by some well-respected early modernist critics (and, although diminishing in influence in recent years, this misconception has by no means vanished), the idea that nowhere in English literature do we see an awareness of the gap between interiority and the external until *Hamlet* is breathtakingly ignorant. In a powerful essay, “A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists,” David Aers suggested that this view was maintained by critics who simply had not read much medieval literature and who tended, for instance, to rely on a couple of morality plays as representative of the entirety of medieval literature (190–196). But even the quickest reading of *Troilus and Criseyde*, for instance, or *SGGK*, reveals poems profoundly concerned with the nature of the self, and with the difficulty of reconciling that

fragmented entity with the expectations of society. And if we go back much further to one of the founding texts of Western culture, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, we find an extraordinarily powerful depiction of the complex inner self, struggling against the demands of external codes, but fully aware of itself as a conflicted and private entity. Indeed, the tradition of confession, increasingly important after the 4th Lateran Council of 1215, itself encouraged the development of a variety of technologies of selfhood (Cannon, ch. 1). Recent and current work by both medievalists and early modernists – showcased in Cummings and Simpson's edited volume *Cultural Reformations*, published in 2010 – works hard to trouble old preconceptions about what changed in the sixteenth century as academics increasingly have conversations across artificial period divides.

There are two ways in which medieval texts might respond particularly well to theoretical interventions. First, at the heart of much modern theory is the idea of the indeterminacy of the text: the text is not a complete, bounded Work, constructed by an Author-God, but a place of uncertain boundaries, a process going through many versions, changed by editors, the processes of textual production, market forces, and, of course, readers (Barthes, Chartier). These issues are true of writings produced in all eras but they are much more obvious in a manuscript culture, where each manuscript is clearly unique. Moreover, authors circulated early versions of their work, changed their poems when political circumstances changed – as happened with Gower's *Confessio amantis*, Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and Chaucer's *Prologue to the Legend of Good Women* – and reflected on ideas and rewrote their work later in life, as with Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*. Examining manuscripts reminds us that a poem can never be separated from its material context: there is no *ur-Canterbury Tales* representing Chaucer's true intent; there are various manuscripts with the tales in different orders, in each of which the scribe has had to make editorial decisions and has undoubtedly at times made mistakes, allowed his pen to slip, lost attention. And indeed, an author's "intent" often changes over time, as the textual history of *PP* makes particularly clear. The way that medieval books were produced invites us to think theoretically in multiple ways: in the case of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, for example, do we locate authorship in the person who physically wrote the text (probably a male scribe), or in the person who initially described the experiences (Kempe herself, who also needs to be distinguished from the character bearing her name in the book)?

The second way in which medieval texts have an essential relationship to modern critical theory has been foregrounded in the last few years, as medievalists have pointed out the surprising number of influential twentieth and twenty-first century theorists who began their academic careers as medievalists, and whose modes of thought were profoundly influenced by their medieval training. Much modern theory, in short, has its origins in medieval culture. In *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory*, Holsinger discusses Bataille, Lacan, Bourdieu, Derrida, and Barthes, commenting on their "recurrent fascination, even obsession with the historical period that modernity most consistently abjected" (5).⁷ And many theorists writing today are similarly dependent on medieval culture: the education and thought of Giorgio Agamben, for instance, is strongly rooted in

medieval studies. Medieval literary culture, with its obsession with hermeneutics (the science of interpretation) and with the nature of the author and authority, is of especial interest to theorists; moreover, as Lacan emphasizes in seminar VII, the relations between the genders are still founded in many ways upon the traditions of courtly love that rose to particular prominence in the twelfth century.⁸

“Theory” has always been a troubled and contested field in literature departments. Critics often talk about the “theory wars” of the 1980s; the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen the publication of books claiming that theory is over⁹ – although looking at the kind of criticism being produced in journals and books suggests otherwise. Indeed, for many critics, theory is a given, something that grounds their work and no longer needs defense or explicit explanation. But there has also been increased resistance to certain kinds of theory in recent years. An important trend has been the “new formalism” (a kind of antitheory theory), ably discussed by Marjorie Levinson in a 2007 *PMLA* article. Levinson argues that extreme adherents of new formalism claim that “to contextualize aesthetic experience is to expose its hedonic dimension as an illusion, distraction, or trap.” She characterizes this belief as a version of the old complaint that “analyzing literature destroys the experience of it” (562). This kind of new formalism might be seen as a polarizing response to the neglect of form by new historicism and to the general suspicion and neglect of the aesthetic in late twentieth-century criticism. However, most critics committed to theorized and historicized approaches are far from neglecting issues relating to form. Considering form should not be an optional extra in literary studies, nor a category of analysis separate from others. Analyzing form is at the heart of what literary critics do, and close reading – itself a theory about how to interpret texts – anchors most “theorized” readings (and is central to all the essays in the present volume). Brantley’s essay on material culture, for instance, is interested both in physical objects, in things and “thing theory,” and in the specific form of *Pearl*. The importance of beauty in literature and the wonder-ful aspects of experiencing texts are also coming under increased scrutiny at the moment. But the category of the aesthetic itself has a history, and beauty has a complicated and important relationship to theory, as Nolan makes clear in the present volume in her exploration of aesthetics in *PP*, drawing on writers as diverse as Aquinas and James Joyce.

Our project – as readers, students, scholars – is multiple: theory helps us to read diversely, to continue to mine texts for what they can tell us about themselves and their cultural moment, and to allow texts to speak to our own contexts and moments. Remaining open to different ways of approaching texts helps us to keep thinking – surely our most urgent imperative.

This Book

The essays in this volume are therefore characterized by diversity. Many draw on classical and medieval theory, and a very wide range of modern theorists are employed: from the established French theorists who rose to prominence

in the 1960s to those writing today. Some essays deal with topics familiar to anyone with a glancing understanding of theory – gender, the death of the author, national identity, the city; others with areas only newly coming under theoretical scrutiny – the imagination, globalization, animals, ecology. Some engage issues of particular relevance to medieval culture such as the church, manuscript culture, and multilingual culture; most with issues central to all cultures and literatures: race, desire, audience, sexuality, genre, canon, class, margins. While the volume focuses on Middle English culture, it interrogates the *time* and *place* of the later medieval period with essays on periodization and globalization, and many essays bear witness to the impossibility of reading Middle English culture in isolation from texts in other languages, especially Latin and French (see especially the essay on language).¹⁰ Several essays also demonstrate the productivity of engaging with literature alongside other cultural artifacts such as visual images (Audience, Material Culture, Ecology) and the value of thinking about texts in dialogue with physical spaces (Church, City, Margins). Essays have varying relationships to theory: one essay – about postcolonialism – explores the history of the concept and whether or not it can be applied to medieval texts; others are primarily grounded in medieval theories (Memory, Aesthetics); others examine how modern theories (of sovereignty, of public interiority and the public sphere) are rooted in specific and misleading ways of reading history and the medieval past. This volume does not try to and could not cover all medieval literature or all theoretical approaches. It aims to include discussion of a wide range of texts, both canonical and obscure, and to model how a variety of different theoretical modes can be deployed in analyzing these texts. It also offers readers a snapshot of what kinds of things are happening in the research community at the moment. Many of the essays are mutually illuminating and speak to similar issues from differing perspectives: manuscript contexts are also explored in essays on genre, on public interiorities, and on desire; sexuality is also discussed in the essay on nation; wonder is a key aspect of the discussions on canon formation and aesthetics.

This book is divided into three parts: the first, on “Selfhood and Community,” comprises chapters which meditate on how the self is imagined and constructed (something that is always done in relationship to others). Some chapters focus on the interior of the self – imagination, desire, memory – and how this interiority is also intersubjective, rather than discrete, an issue that “public interiorities” examines through a different lens. Other chapters focus on the communities that define the self through inclusion and exclusion – these communities can be based around, for instance, gender, race, sexuality, and animality.¹¹ Augustine, with his intense focus on subjectivity, casts a particularly long shadow throughout this section of the book. The second part – “Constructing Texts, Constructing Textual History” – is the most overtly “literary” section. It examines how texts are made – by authors and audiences, using genre and aesthetics, out of manuscripts and materials – and are preserved and valued in the canon and as part of a certain period. Reader response is perhaps the most recurrent theme throughout these essays: authors are themselves readers of sources and genres, and their texts are shaped by readers, some of whom

are scribes and editors, or scholars and syllabus designers, determining which texts are widely read, and how they are read. The third part of the book, “Politics and Places” – moves further outwards to large structures, institutions, and places. Chapters focus on key conceptual spaces such as city, church, margins, and nation, consider political aspects of medieval society, such as how languages interacted and the ways in which postcolonialism resonates in medieval texts, examine deep structures of society such as sovereignty and class, and investigate place and politics through the current major critical trends of ecocriticism and globalization.

Despite the extraordinary pressure on the humanities at the moment, in many ways the field has never been stronger, more diverse, or more obviously relevant. Interdisciplinary, theorized work on literature and neuroscience, a growing field at the moment, shows us that reading changes our minds in more than one way. Our behavior can physiologically alter the structure of our brains, as was shown by Maguire *et al.*’s classic analysis of the brains of London taxi drivers, whose posterior hippocampi (the part of the brain that relates to spatial awareness) were dramatically enlarged as they learnt the complex geography of London’s streets. This neuroplasticity makes clear that what we do changes how we think and who we are. Studies of reading and the brain are yielding fascinating results: one recent study demonstrates that sensory metaphors activate the sensory cortex. In other words there is a great deal of overlap between actually touching something and reading a metaphor employing tactile terms. Our brains react differently when we read of someone’s “velvet voice,” for example, rather than their “pleasing voice” (Lacey *et al.*). Other studies even suggest that reading or hearing stories – for young children as well as adults – makes people more empathetic; reading changes how we behave in the world (Oatley *et al.*). Many medieval dream visions utilize the motif of reading as the catalyst for a psychological journey as the dreamer moves from book to dream. We modern readers too move from book to developing our own inner lives in myriad ways. Stories, images, metaphors, even individual words condition our responses to the world and help us to understand experiences not our own, both literary and otherwise. Reading theoretically and in interdisciplinary ways helps us to connect.

Notes

I am grateful to Anthony Bale, Ardis Butterfield, and Elliot Kendall, for discussions which have informed my thinking while writing this introduction.

- 1 See Vincent Gillespie’s essay in the present volume.
- 2 For ease of reference, where possible theoretical works are cited from the *Norton Anthology* (Leitch *et al.*); this useful introductory volume pays attention to classical and medieval as well as modern theory.
- 3 Of course, this broad definition of theory runs the risk of flattening out the differences between very diverse thinkers: Jacques Lacan, primarily a psychoanalyst, for instance, was quite a different kind of thinker to Roland Barthes, a literary theorist; the texts of St. Augustine, philosopher and theologian, have a very different relationship to literature

- to the writings of cultural theorists such as Michel Foucault. But from the point of view of the critic, what these authors have in common is that they can all be used to construct meaning, to pressure the text from outside.
- 4 Derrida writes that doubling reproduces “the conscious, voluntary, intentional relationship that the writer institutes in his exchanges with the history to which he belongs” and affirms that “reading must not be content with doubling” (1692).
 - 5 Confusingly, Chaucer’s intent seems to be to tell us that we cannot discover authorial intent and that readers matter more anyway.
 - 6 This essay (“Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the Prioress’s Tale”) is engaged with in some detail in David Lawton’s essay in the present volume.
 - 7 Cole and Smith’s more recent volume also makes an important intervention in rewriting the archaeology of modern critical theory.
 - 8 See also Žižek’s discussion of courtly love as the origin of film noir’s *femme fatale*, and his analysis of the film *The Crying Game* in the terms of courtly love (Žižek 2420–2427).
 - 9 However, books that suggest we are somehow beyond the age of theory are not uniform in their perspective; Eagleton’s *After Theory*, for instance, is certainly not arguing that we abandon the attempt to think theoretically (2, 221).
 - 10 Texts written in languages other than English are not routinely quoted in the original in this volume, except where reading the text in the original is particularly important for understanding the points that contributors are making. Middle English texts are not usually translated, except where contributors have thought it necessary to do so to clarify meaning for those readers relatively new to Middle English.
 - 11 Unfortunately, a commissioned essay on Disability could not be completed for inclusion in this *Handbook*, for reasons beyond the contributor’s control.

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Part 1

Selfhood and Community

1

Imagination

Aranye Fradenburg

Imagynacion is a might thorow the whiche we portray alle ymages of absent and present thinges.

The Cloud of Unknowing

Two things cannot be rightly put together without a third; there must be some bond of union between them.

Plato, *Timaeus*

According to conventional wisdom, medieval understandings of the imagination lack imagination by comparison with Hamlet's "king of infinite space" and the Romantic sublime. It would take centuries, so the old story goes, for Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* to elevate the imagination to the status of "the living Power and prime agent of all human perception."¹ But this narrative has problems. The dependence of thought on perception and imagination was axiomatic for premodern writers: the mind retained sense impressions in the form of images that could be further abstracted into concepts and propositions.² Experiences and things did not enter the mind directly; "but the images of the perceived objects are available to the thought recalling them" (Augustine, *Confessions*, X.viii (13)). But while the insubstantiality of images was often lamented, it was by no means simply lamentable. It gave images their plasticity. The imagination had "thirdness"; it formed links between different kinds of mental phenomena.³ Without this plasticity the mind could not learn, hope, decide, and plan; it could not anticipate a future time. Augustine thought it marvelous: "I [can] combine with past events images of various things, whether experienced directly or believed on the basis of what I have experienced; and on this basis I reason about future actions and events and hopes,

and again think of all these things in the present” (X.viii (14)). Not only did the imagination play a significant role in the process of thought; it was a *sine qua non* of our ontology, especially the qualities and dimensions of our sentience. It had a crucial role to play in our salvation and God’s providential order.

Nicolette Zeeman describes Langland’s allegorical character Ymaginatyf as a “capacious inner sense,” “a distinctive inclusiveness, with . . . inbuilt, etymological allusions to images, imaginative functions, and ‘seeing,’ as well as to hypothetical and speculative forms of cogitation” (84).⁴ The generosity of this conception does not lag much behind Coleridge’s “living Power and prime agent.” True, Coleridge’s further specification of the secondary imagination as “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” would have sounded a bit heterodox to premodern ears; and *Piers Plowman* is chiefly about psychological travail and the threat posed to salvation by the *limitations* of human understanding – a concern regarded by some scholars as consistent with the distressed fourteenth century’s interest in negative theology and accompanying critiques of knowledge (Utz 129–130). Capacious though Ymaginatyf may be, Langland’s poem is full of false starts and frustration. The Romantic imagination suffers little from frustration; however tiny the human figure standing on the verge of the abyss, its mind contains the very thing (the “eternal act of creation”) that seems to outstrip it. Arguably, the medieval imagination only translates “ineffable and therefore unknown forms of sentience” into truth tolerable by the human mind (S. Langer 39); it transmits divinity, rather than secreting it. But the notion of composition as re-creation of Creation was known to the Middle Ages; “high medieval authors . . . sometimes . . . stylize[d] themselves as *werlthgot* (i.e., Lord of the fictional world created by them)” (Utz 131). Exceptionalist understandings of the imagination have a very long, if erratic, history. But even humbler notions of the imagination gave it reach; the medieval imagination mediated between different kinds of minds, powers, and worlds, between the past and the present, here and there. If not divine creativity, it was divine connectivity, responsible for extraordinary states of mind. How could we know God without solitary contemplation of the “ymages of . . . absent things”?

Humanist and new-critical histories of art commonly assign the values of preservation, craftsmanship, and communal experience to the Middle Ages, and creativity, inspiration and individual experience to the Renaissance or the nineteenth century. Ullrich Langer, for example, argues that medieval poets “celebrated the survival of human culture, not its original reinvention by an individual” (22; Utz 129). It is true that medieval poets often saw themselves as “makars” (makers), but no one doubted that prophetic dreams and visions were mediated by the imagination. And the cosmological deterritorializations of Bernardus Silvestris or Dante Alighieri, the *summa*-style expansiveness of the *Roman de la Rose*, the historical sweep of *Lazamon’s Brut*, are hardly modest efforts. *Translatio* did not simply preserve the past; it made it new again. But the point of this essay is not to reverse the charges on presentism’s *timor mortis*. It is to explore the *interdependence* of individual and community, and the consequences thereof for

our understanding of the richness and complexity of medieval understandings of the imagination.

There are, of course, different cultural and historical articulations of this interdependence, and we ought to attend to them. But we should also take care not to overstate the salience of these differences, or neglect common elements. Tradition grows, and creativity emerges, from networks *constituted by* intersecting histories. The “I,” like its mutually constitutive webs of relationships, is a unique combination of genetic potentialities, traditions, and experiences, many of which are also parts of other such combinations. The psychoanalytic term “intersubjectivity” designates this paradoxical dependence of subjective experience on relationality. The theory of “mentalization” also builds on the idea that we come to understand our “own” minds only by interacting with the minds of others (Fonagy *et al.*). Subjectivity is a *process* that occurs when relationships beckon to, and thereby help to design, the minds of those linked thereby. The social bond, that is to say, depends on feelings of understanding and being understood. Relationality is not groupthink; it *enables* self-process. However much they may have longed to soar like skylarks and wander lonely as clouds, Romantic writers always had to grapple with the embeddedness of imaginative activity in relationships, with family, friends, lovers, books, “nature” (Carlson). Indeed, in *Frankenstein*, the temptations of aloneness lead to disaster. Contemporary neuroscience, moreover, confirms the importance of relationality to imaginative process. Nancy Andreasen, for example, argues that “genius” emerges within and from the very communities whose patient labors and inside-the-box innovations might seem incapable of predicting it.

William Dunbar’s “Lament for the Makars” is both an ambitious poetic genealogy *and* a melancholy catalog of memory-images of dead or dying predecessors, to which “facultie” he is linked by fear: “*timor mortis conturbat me*,” “the fear of death confounds me.” Death has taken all his “brethren”; and since he is himself a maker, “On forse I man [Death’s] nyxt pray be” (l. 95). Does Dunbar present himself as the *therapon*, the companion/survivor who addresses us when we are in the state “in which there is no other to respond” but him? In the end, only the *therapon*’s loyalty matters; since he will not run away from us, or put us away, or leave us for dead, only his interlocution can restore our “freedom of speech” (Davoine and Gaudillière 209–210). But perhaps Dunbar is not the *therapon* but the subject maddened by fear, who has no others left to respond to him. Or perhaps we can’t distinguish the one from the other. This is intersubjectivity in the form of identification: “He has tane Roull of Aberdene,/ And gentill Roull of Corstorphin/ Two bettir fallowis did no man se” (ll. 77–79). Dunbar already knew what Freud would later argue, that we learn of our own death only through the death of the other, that such knowledge as we have of the solitary experience of dying is ironically relational. If Dunbar’s catalog is a humble medieval registration of creaturely vulnerability, it is also, gravely, singularizing: the commonness of death does not make it any less traumatic; it is when we feel the hand that has touched so many other shoulders touch our own that we are at once singled out, and subject(ed) to the law of nature.

The imagination's role in processing the transformations necessary to life and death is repeatedly foregrounded in medieval narrative, certainly as important a "source" for medieval conceptions of the imagination as are treatises on the soul or on dreams (Kolve). The dream-vision genre in particular – a long-attested form, but explosively popular in the fourteenth century – has attracted much attention from critics interested in medieval ideas about the imagination (Lynch). In Chaucer's dream-vision poem *The Book of the Duchess*, the apparently obtuse narrator – a *therapon* of the order of Sancho Panza – questions the melancholic Man in Black about the latter's lamentably lost "queen," White. The two sift through the images of White stored in the Man in Black's memory, but the narrator doesn't understand how she was lost until the Man in Black finally exclaims, "She ys ded!" (l. 1309). But who is this mysterious Man in Black anyway? Is he John of Gaunt, whose duchess, Blanche, died in the course of the 1368 plague? Then again, the Man in Black says "y am sorwe, and sorwe ys y" (l. 597). Does he stand for an emotion? Is he an allegorical figure? Or is he (also) a reprise of the brooding noblemen in Chaucer's French sources? Perhaps he is part of the narrator's own melancholic mind – a figment of his "sorwful ymagynacioun" (l. 14)? But how does that help, since the narrator is, by his own account, a "mased thyng" (l. 12), uncertain of his circumstances and the nature of his being. Ontological indeterminacy once again accompanies the work of the imagination.

Melancholy wounds our sentience, our (feeling of) aliveness. We know that our lives have happened to us, but we cannot *claim* them or even feel that we have *experienced* them. We can't tell whether we are alive or dead. If we shelter the images of lost objects inside our minds, we also take on their deadness. As courtly love knew, when existence is a doubtful matter, the smallest, most delicate of responses – a look, a shift in tone, a ring carelessly left behind – can call us back to a conviction of aliveness. The *therapon* is therefore a signifying fool (cf. the garrulity of both the narrator and Pandarus in *Troilus and Criseyde*). He embodies the responsiveness that calls us back to aliveness, and the promise, the oath of loyalty, implicit therein. How can "I" be dead if I can hear the friendly commentary of a "third" who is neither the lost object that walks now with her back to me, nor the ruined "I" that follows her? Sometimes epiphany is a flash of intersubjectivity, when what needs to be said can finally be said.

In *BD*, of course, epiphany is equivocal. Arguably, the poem's ending illustrates the problem of "other minds" (Austen) as much as it illustrates the dependence of understanding on the social link. But the narrator and the Man in Black have *accompanied* each other in a process of imagining, remembering, and wondering, while hovering ontologically over the borderline between life and death, as doubles, friends, ghosts, indeed as images. "She ys ded!" is the moment when the power of mutual attention stands out in sharp relief. Intersubjective imagining has given the Man in Black, as it would give Don Quixote, the liberty to be mad, to be undead, for as much time as he needs, without interference from uncomprehending others; and the attempt creates the sought-for link, the "third" (in *BD*, poetry itself) that links the one to the other, however perplexing the experience and uncertain the outcome.

The pair buy time, and use it to affect (in all senses) each other. The ontological uncertainties of melancholia can enable as well as impede exchange; through conversation, even with “oneself,” the fixations associated with melancholia can be loosened up, plasticized, and brought into a new relationality in “present” time.

Galen, in the first century CE, fully somatized classical psychology, and medicine followed suit well into the seventeenth century. “Black bile” was thought to be the bodily “humor” responsible for melancholy. But even when somatic explanations of psychological distress dominated understandings of the mind, the imagination was thought to mediate the interactions between mind and body, and images were often used in healing. Premodern medicine was well aware both of the power of the placebo effect and its dependence on the quality of the relationship between healer and sufferer. In *BD*, the narrator refinds his mind by engaging with the Man in Black in the kind of friendly probing and conversation that had long been enjoined on physicians, even before the time of Hippocrates (Jackson). Imaginary doubling is the chief mode of affect transmission in *TC* also. The narrator is the servant of the servants of Love; Pandarus is a failed lover whose perplexities register on the comic rather than the tragic scale. Sustaining this double sensitivity, to the horror of desolation as well as its humbling prevalence, is essential to the finding of the addressee. Unlike the narrator of *BD*, however, Pandarus is a failed *therapon*. In Book V, he tries to take all the tragedy out of Troilus by urging upon him all the conventional remedies for melancholy (including socializing, and entertainment (Olson)), but in an attempt to evade rather than fully engage Troilus’s madness.

Mysticism: The *Therapon* as Inhuman Partner

We are constantly changed by the minds of others; feelings are notoriously “contagious.” But the fact of our vulnerability to influence does not necessarily make its effects any less perplexing. We do not always feel close to other minds, let alone to the mind of the “Other” – whether that Other be God, or the Fates, or the ancestor. Sometimes we feel the Other knows us better than we do ourselves; sometimes we feel we can channel messages from the Real, sometimes we fear we will be shattered by them. *The Cloud of Unknowing* begins with a prayer to “God, unto Whom alle hertes ben open, and unto Whom alle wille spekith, and unto Whom no privé thing is hid” (Gallacher, ll. 2–3). This is intimacy indeed. But if our hearts are open books, who, or what, is reading them? The *Cloud* author warns us of the pitfalls of the contemplative life, especially for “newlings”:

For yif it so be that thei . . . here redde or spoken hou that men schuld lift up here hertes unto God, as fast thei stare in the sterres as thei wolde be aboven the mone . . . Thees men willen sumtyme with the coriousté of here ymaginacion peerce the planetes, and make an hole in the firmament to loke in therate. (Gallacher, ll. 1978–1982)

One thinks of Nicholas, the clerk in Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*, who “evere caped upward into the eir” (I 3473) while pretending to receive his “showing” of God’s

latest plan to destroy the world. But the *Cloud* author's sarcasm is a measure of his seriousness: newlings are in danger of mistaking images for spiritual realities, and thus forgetting the differences between their minds and God's.

For before the tyme be that the ymaginacion be in grete partye refreynid by the light of grace in the reson . . . thei mowe in no wise put away the wonderful and the diverse thoughtes, fantasies and ymages, the whiche ben mynystred and preentid in theire mynde by the light and the corioustee of ymaginacyon . . . alle this inobedyence is the pyne of the original synne. (ll. 2223–2230)

The attempt to imagine the unimaginable can readily threaten the onset of trauma, exclusion, madness, the irreparable loss of the ear of the Other.

And yet we know that medieval mystics regularly risked this separation from God, and used images to assist contemplation. When Julian of Norwich is near death, her curate arrives with “the image of thy maker and Saviour. Louke thereupon and comfort thee therewith.” Though she is looking “up rightward into Hevyn,” she agrees instead “to sett [her] eyen in the face of the Crucifix . . . wherein [she] beheld a comon light, and . . . wiste not how” (Crampton, ll. 89–98). Julian speaks of fear and doubt, of “seing and knowing in sight with a soft drede” (l. 429), of the challenge of properly evaluating the images she sees: “[o]ne tyme mine understondyng was led downe into the see ground, and there I saw hill and dalis grene, semand, as it were, mosse begrowne.” Her spirits were “in grete travel” when beholding this image, doubting it was a showing; but then God “gave me more sight whereby I understode treuly that it . . . was a figure and likenes of our foule dede hame, that our faire, bright, blissid Lord bare for our sins.” For Julian, contemplation has its ups and downs. She means to reassure us (and herself) that these vicissitudes are survivable. It is safe to know God, she insists; she sees no wrath in Him, only love. In fact there is a rhythmic movement in the *Shewings* whereby ambiguous images and static give way to God's gifts of knowledge; mystical experience is, finally, more “hamely” than it is ravishing or transporting. Though God's “werkyng . . . overpassyt al our imagyning and all that we can wenyn and thynken,” nonetheless “[h]e will not we dredyn to know the thyngs that He shewith.” He wants us to know him, for “He will be sene and He wil be sowte, He wil be abedyn and He wil be trosted.” (Crampton, ll. 361–375).

Rhetoric: Can You Hear Me Now?

Hildegard of Bingen pictured her own visions as spiritual flames passing from the heavens through the mind of the mystic to her writing tablet. But media – modes of intersubjective transmission – are not always so reliable. The fits and starts of *PP* are formal analogs of much wider interruptions in service; during the plagues of the fourteenth century, most of England was a dead letter office. Sermons, proclamations, counsel, for the most part fell on deaf, or dead, ears. I know of

no rhetorical treatise that explicitly anticipates the catastrophic wiping out of audition, but arguably, that is rhetoric's primal scene. The rhetorician's desire is to spectacularize attention, to put intersubjectivity on stage, in law courts, political assemblies, and evangelical gatherings. Even *ethos*, the "character" of the orator, is a relational concept: virtue helps the orator *persuade others*. And however upright he may be, he still needs to shape his words according to their social rank and *habitus*. This is not easy; Aristotle finally recommends that orators focus on "notions possessed by everybody," because very few people can learn new things on the spot (*Rhetoric*, I.1). The stakes of the ethical relationship between orator and auditor multiply in Book IV of St. Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*, a "translation" of classical rhetoric into what would become the Christian *ars praedicandi* (arts of preaching). It focuses presciently on the rhetorical temptations to which evangelism is vulnerable: far better to convey Christian truth humbly and clearly than to trick it out with bombast and ornament. Medieval and classical rhetorics were largely agreed that the imagination was responsible for inventing the phantasms which, despite their insubstantiality, could be so (dangerously) powerful in swaying the minds of listeners. Augustine felt, and passed on to monastics, the Neo-Platonic dislike of the imagination's ability to confuse us on the score of reality, but, as noted, he was well aware of the mind's reliance on it: "Every one of them enters into memory, each by its own gate . . . the objects themselves do not enter, but the images of the perceived objects are available to the thought recalling them" (*Confessions*, X.viii (13)). Those images are nonetheless the very traces of lived experience – of color, shape, smell, taste, touch – and the means by which minds are linked to their environs, to books, to themselves.

Rhetorical “invention” depends on the plasticity of images. Geoffrey de Vinsauf’s comparison of invention to the creation of mental blueprints is used by Chaucer in *TC* to describe the workings of Pandarus’s mind. In Book I, Pandarus and Troilus pledge to each other their “trouthe”; “[m]y lif, my deth, hol in thyn hond I leye;/ Help now” (I.1053–1054), says Troilus to Pandarus. Speak *for me*, he pleads, “[t]o hire that to the deth me may comande” (I.1057) After this moment of intensified intersubjectivity, of troth-plighting and covenant, Pandarus goes on

his wey, thenkyng on this matere . . .
For everi wight that hath an hous to founde . . .
 wol bide a stounde,
And sende his hertes line out fro withinne
Aldirfirst his purpos for to wynde (I.1062–1069)

It is as if the acquisition of an other self not only required but set in train specially crafty thought. His newly sworn best friend forever, Troilus, having fallen into his fateful love, now falls into a fellowship whose warranty is the death that both threatens and defines it. Palamon too, in the Knight's Tale, re-minds Arcite that he is his "cosyn and thy brother/ Ysworn ful depe . . . / That nevere, for to dyen in the peyne,/ . . . / Neither of us . . . to hyndre oother" (I.1131–1135). The language

repeats, to the rhythm of the death drive, the doubling “invented” by the oath, and the resulting simulacrum, the supporter of identity who at the same time unravels it. Troilus and Pandarus are likewise beginning their journey towards the Real of death; and when, in Book V (a book full of memorial images and hallucinations) the world becomes a “foule dede hame” for Troilus, it does so for Pandarus and the narrator too: “al nys but a faire/ This world that passeth soone as floures faire” (V.1840–1841). As with Julian of Norwich, an extraordinarily loyal counterpart is needed, one who “nil falsen no wight, dar I seye,/ That wol his herte al hoolly on him leye.” The narrator flinches at the Real – which cannot be bargained with, with which there is no exchange – and turns to Julian’s “hamely” God, who *will be trusted*, urging all “yonge fresshe folks” to “up-casteth the visage” of the “herte” “[t]o thilke God that after his ymage/ Yow made” (V.1839–1840). The imagination may trick us into mistaking a humble “fare-cart” for our lost love, but the narrator hopes that, by the same means, it will also help us recuperate such desublimations, intensifying resemblance by turning the heart’s face to the divine Image whose imprint it bears in turn. Did Chaucer think this substitution of images was really a salutary way of working through the pain of betrayal? I doubt it. But I do think he meant to draw us into a series of identifications – of intersubjective transformations (narrator-Troilus-Pandarus-“folkes”) – that makes us *feel* the ontological and intersubjective confusion attendant on trauma.

Faculty Psychology: Falling to Pieces

Intersubjectivity goes on within as well as between minds; “selfhood” is a process, not a consistent or homogeneous entity. Both Plato and Aristotle acknowledged its heterogeneity, believing that one part of the soul could be “moved” by something, and another, not. For Plato, the three main components of the human soul are reason, the affects, and appetite. The imagination is a problem for the soul, rarely an asset, because the perceptions it processes into such convincing images derive from the ever-changing sensible world – and that world is itself merely an illusion, that “passeth soone as floures faire.” The ideal forms of things are, by contrast, so real as to be superreal, and thus undetectable by our senses. Phantasms enchant us because, as traces of sensory experience, they appear to be so substantial; like the *Cloud*-author’s newlings, piercing the heavens with their upward gaze, we may come to believe we really have hold of something when we are actually missing everything that matters most. Premodern treatises nearly always acknowledge that imaginative creations are appealing (and powerful) because they are semblances of living process. But of what value is living process in the first place, let alone phantasms thereof, if creaturely life, that seems so real, is really naught?

In the psychologies deriving from Aristotle and Galen, the mind is divided into three “faculties” – imagination, reason (or judgment), and memory. Ideally, the faculties work harmoniously together, but in reality their interrelationships are often fraught with misunderstanding, even strife. The imagination presents

phantasms to the passions as well as to reason. If passion overrules reason, the mind will mistakenly judge the phantasm to be “good” – that is to say, a (beneficent) reality – and pursue it, like a will o’ the wisp. When Troilus first sees Criseyde, “of hire look in him ther gan to quyken/ So gret desir and such affecciou/ That in his herte botme gan to stiken/ Of hir his fixe and depe impressioun” (TC, I.295–298). For both Platonic and Aristotelian traditions, reason, not impression caused by “affecciou,” is the jewel in the mind’s crown. The *Cloud* author puts it this way: “reson” and “wille” are “principal mighte[s]” because “thei worchen in pure spirit withouten any maner of bodelines; ymaginacion and sensualité [be] secondary [to reason and will], for thei worchen in the body with bodely instrumentes, the whiche ben oure five wittes” (Gallacher, ll. 2190–2193). We share these latter “mights” with “beasts”; medieval natural philosophers often note that animals can form and evaluate mental images (to strategize about action in the near future). Once corrupted by original sin, our minds become bestial all too readily. But reason is still the faculty that sets the human soul apart from other forms of sentience.

So how reliable are these piebald minds of ours? What can we (safely) use them for? Contemplation, we have seen, has its dangers; what about philosophy, theology? Is there, for example, a difference between simply imagining a God and imagining a God that actually exists? And how would we know? (This question is the crux of Anselm’s magisterial, but not entirely convincing, ontological proof of the existence of God.) Both Plato’s *Timaeus* and Aristotle’s *De anima* bequeathed to the European Middle Ages a mind that did not always know itself, let alone agree with itself, whose most cherished convictions were almost impossible to substantiate. It is worth noting that scorn for the everyday, error-prone workings of the human mind is often a theme in the scientific psychologies of our own day, but happily there are signs that this is changing. “Confabulation” and “delusion” are being reevaluated as important supporters of, rather than obstacles to, (inter)subjectivity. Many such stories (e.g., “my left arm really is there, you just can’t see it”) draw on every resource available, on behalf of relationality – one tries to be a good patient, to answer the question appropriately; one hopes to find an other who can respond. Self-and-other experience *needs* plasticity in order to adapt to changing circumstances.

Awareness of the differences between external and internal reality, and the usefulness of the latter’s pliability, manifests itself in the *Morall Fabillis* of Robert Henryson. Probably a schoolmaster as well as a notary, Henryson would likely have taught with the aid of Aesopian fables, exemplary and unquestionably fictional stories (the animals can talk) that crisscross different kinds of sentience in order to enhance the capacity for judgment. The *moralitates* appended to the ends of Henryson’s *Morall Fabillis* do not appear to celebrate plasticity; in fact they lay down the law with a heavy hand: “Ay rinnis the foxe, als lang as hai fute hais” (l. 827). In the *Fabillis* intersubjectivity is usually deceptive, seductive, destructive: “Brother, gif you be wyse, I reid the fle/ To matche the with ane thrawart feneyit marrow” (ll. 2924–2925). But the narrator of the *Morall Fabillis* also defends the importance of the imagination to ethical instruction: the reason “feinyeit fabils of ald poetré” first began was, “to repreif [man] of [his] misleving,/ . . . be figure of ane

uther thing” (ll. 1–7). Imagination helps ethics – which is all about “others” – by supporting a kind of mentalization (I learn to “see” myself in other things). “Put in exempill and similitude,” Aesop shows us “How mony men in operatioun/ Ar like to beistis in conditioun” (ll. 47–49). Intersentient imagination is a means to bring home the creatureliness of the human, our vulnerability and fear. Seeing ourselves in other things hones our capacity to attend to, and learn about, this vulnerability. This is, at least, the hope of many a schoolmaster.

Return to Mysticism

Sense perceptions are abstracted by the imagination in preparation for their comparison to past experience and evaluation by reason: “the actions of the imaginative faculty” include “retaining things perceived by the senses, combining these things, and imitating them” (Maimonides 2.56, 370). The “intellect” is a higher power, because it distinguishes the universal from the individual, and thereby enables logic and critical thinking. To whatever degree the imagination abstracts images from the senses, those images remained tied to sensory experience; when we imagine a horse that we have never seen, it will still look like a particular horse, of a certain color and size. Far worse than this allegiance to the senses and to particulars, “every deficiency of reason” can be traced to the imagination, because (as the *Cloud* author also complained) it can lead us to attribute corporeality – e.g., feet – to God and the angels, or to think of God as performing actions (speaking, sitting, dwelling) in the ways that human beings do (II.12, 280).

As Julian of Norwich’s writing has already shown, however, not all contemplatives are as ambivalent about the imagination as the *Cloud* author. In his sermons on *The Song of Songs*, the great mystic St. Bernard of Clairvaux opines that revelation is the work of the angels, who communicate to us the images and ideas through which we can comprehend God. Without this mediation, our minds could not bear the “radiance of the truth”:

when the spirit is ravished out of itself and granted a vision of God that suddenly shines into the mind with the swiftness of a lightning-flash, immediately . . . images of earthly things fill the imagination, either as an aid to understanding or to temper the intensity of the divine light . . . [I]n their shadow the . . . radiance of the truth is rendered more bearable to the mind and more capable of being communicated to others. My opinion is that they are formed in our imaginations by the inspirations of the holy angels. (41.3)

For Maimonides too the imagination, despite its dangers, is the switching station between the divine and the human. Its ability to translate superreal messages into intelligible visions depends on the very plasticity for which it is so often excoriated. Phantasms are traces of sense impressions, but they are also *traces*, free of attachment to worldly realities and thereby more open to otherworldly communications. States of dreaming or trance are the times when the “greatest and noblest action [of the

imagination] takes place.” Then it is “that a certain overflow [can overflow from God] . . . to this faculty,” and it is the cause of “veridical dreams and prophecy” (2.56, 370).

Even hallucination is actually a “perfection” of imaginative activity, because it “sees the thing as if it were outside” (2.56, 370). The imagination produces illusory reality-effects, but it also permits sensational reality-effects that signify superreal origin – angels with many faces, chariots of fire. It is indeed possible, in the Middle Ages, to think of the imagination as the means (and the only means) by which creatures experience the Sublime, in the form of divinity:

the true reality . . . of prophecy consists in its being an overflow . . . from God . . . through the intermediation of the Active Intellect, toward the rational faculty . . . and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty. This is the highest degree of man. (2.36, 369)

The imagination does not simply process information from the senses on behalf of the intellect; the intellect also serves the imagination, as a conduit for the divine “overflow” that perfects the human mind. Though the perfect imaginer lives in solitude far away from corruption, he is filled and fulfilled by an Other, and will further share the divine “overflow” with all others of his kind, to their general benefit, including their well-being, longevity, and (political) amity:

Whenever [a perfect man’s] imaginative faculty . . . receives from the intellect an overflow corresponding to [its] speculative perfection, this individual will . . . see only God and His angels, and will . . . achieve knowledge of true opinions . . . for the well-being of men in their relations with each other. (2.56, 372)

The perfecting power of the imagination is part and parcel of its intersubjective action and inspiration.

The Historical Imagination

The semantic range of “perfection” includes topics of forming, making, and completing. Particularly in its medieval uses, it evokes craftsmanship and creativity. In Exodus 25, the work of consecrating, creating holiness, making sacrifice acceptable, hence bridging the human and the divine, takes the form of a finely crafted enclosure, the ark: “thou schalt make on euer eithir side of Goddis answeyng place twei cherubyns of gold, and betun out with hamer” (Wycliffite Bible). The empty space thus defined, where Yahweh will dwell when he is among the Israelites, is a place of transmission, empty of idols, but not of “answeyng.” Yahweh’s specifications initiate a series of mediations, from the image of speech itself, to the process of making an imaginary object material. As we have seen, the power of the imagination to give form to what is unimaginable or absent is crucial to its affective significance: