

PROSPECTS FOR A HISTORY OF
MEDIEVAL LITERARY THEORY

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I would like to lay out, not a neatly defined and comprehensive answer to the question, "what is medieval literary theory?"--but rather, to lay out a proposed plan of action, a line of research, that might in due time lead us to an understanding of medieval ideas about literary creativity.

I have always thought it strange that we do not already have such a history. If we wish to teach students about the Investiture Conflict, or about Nominalism, or about Astrology, Theology, or any number of other things, there are detailed accounts a-plenty to provide all the background we need. If we wish to acquaint students with the medieval university, for instance, we not only have the excellent descriptive books of Gordon Leff and A. B. Cobban, but can also provide two useful sets of primary sources in translation by Lynn Thorndike and by Helene Wieruszowski.¹ But where would you send a student to read similar books about medieval ideas relating to literature?

The late O. B. Hardison published a revealing analysis of this problem in an article in Medievalia et Humanistica (1976) which he titled "Toward a History of Medieval Literary Criticism."² He makes the flat statement that "there is no book that could be called a standard history of literary criticism." He then goes on, as if in answer to my question of a moment ago, to show how the various books usually named are in fact deficient--George Saintsbury's History of Criticism in Europe

(1900), old and erroneous in places; Edgar de Bruyne's three-volume Etudes d'esthétique (1946), more concerned with beauty in all arts than with criticism in literature; Hans Glunz' Literäresthetik des europäischen Mittelalters (1937), dealing with ideas rather than literary theory; Ernest Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (1953), dealing more with the minutiae of literary practice of metaphor and topoi than with literary theory; J. Witt Atkins, English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase (1952), more national than medieval, as Hardison puts it--and, I may add, also guilty of tending to reduce even English theory to one author, Geoffrey of Vinsauf; and, finally, Charles S. Baldwin's Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic (1928), which Hardison sees as blurring together literature and rhetoric to the great detriment of modern scholarship.

Hardison concludes his opening section by quoting a passage from Cleanth Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt, Short History of Criticism (1957) which seems virtually to write off the Middle Ages:

Let us say, in summation, that the Middle Ages . . . were not in fact ages of literary criticism. . . . It was an age of theological thinking in a theologically oriented and theocratic society. Such a society does not characteristically promote the essentially humanistic activity of literary criticism.³

I cannot, of course, know what you think about a statement like that, but to me it is based on a false premise, and is in fact, rather absurd. It could have been written in 1857 rather than 1957. (Hardison does point out a bit later, incidentally, that their treatment of

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medieval literary criticism is built around two authors who might surprise some people--namely, Plotinus and Thomas Aquinas.)

I have quoted O. B. Hardison at such length not merely because I agree with most of what he says, but because he better than anyone else I know has put his finger on the real problem we face, and has articulated in short compass what others have only dimly understood or confusedly expressed. I recommend the article to your attention.

What makes Hardison's article even more interesting is that just two years earlier (1974) he, Alex Preminger and Kevin Kerrane had published a large volume which they called Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations.⁴ The nine classical authors are Aristophanes, Plato, Aristotle, Demetrius, Horace, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Quintilian, Pseudo-Longinus, and Plotinus. For the Middle Ages eight: Evanthius and Donatus, Proclus, Fulgentius, Averroes, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Dante, and Boccaccio. Unfortunately, as in many such anthologies, some authors are presented in very short snippets of selections. For the Middle Ages, Dante and Boccaccio get the most space, but Averroes gets as much space as Geoffrey of Vinsauf, and Fulgentius gets nearly as much as each of those two.

This collection of eight medieval texts, like Hardison's article itself, serves to point up a significant set of questions.

One is the question of definition. Hardison himself offers what he calls "a definition of literary criticism that is workable for the Middle Ages." Thus, he says, in general, literary criticism includes:

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- essays on the history and theory of literature and the nature of literary genius
- discussions of style
- biographies of authors
- readings of individual literary works.⁵

My primary objection to this kind of statement is that it seems to imply that we, the scholars of the twentieth century, should be the ones to determine what medieval man thought about literature. It is our own, retroactive judgment which needs to be determined, apparently, not the judgments of the medieval men we study.

I think one of the problems here lies in the word "criticism" itself. It means far too much in today's usage, and therefore it tends to mean very little specifically. But its root meaning is still in the arena of observation-evaluation-ranking-analysis-grading-classifying. As D. A. Russell has recently pointed out:

When we speak of 'critic' we do of course use a Greek word. The kritikos is the man capable of judging.⁶

But, can one only judge that which already exists? Is it possible, in other words, to make a valid judgment about that which is yet to be created? If that is possible, what do we call the capacity to do it?

The term "criticism" in both British and American English has come to have such a commonly-accepted post-creation, analytic or evaluative meaning that I doubt whether any useful purpose is to be served any more by trying to apply it to the kinds of judgment that precede the creative literary act. I think we

should reserve its use only to acts of our own, our modern evaluation of medieval literary works--constructing, for example, our own modern appreciation and understanding of Gawain and the Green Knight or of The Divine Comedy. When we work to do this, even if we--like Alistair Minnis in his recent book on "authorial intention"⁷ try to put ourselves in the minds of medieval authors, or--like Judson Allen--try to assess what he calls the "ethical poetic" of the period;⁸ or, like Alain Michel in his La parole et la beauté,⁹ try to assess the medieval aesthetics of language--in all these cases we are looking at past fact, past creations, and we are doing it ultimately for our own benefit. This is a useful, and, I believe, an appropriate human activity. We live in modern times, and it could well be that the poems of Machaut or of Petrarch may tell us something about our own lives if we understand them well enough. If we are indeed, as Bernard of Chartres insisted, dwarfs mounted on the shoulders of giants, then knowing our literary past is important to us. To engage in such retroactive studies is, I would say, to engage in "criticism" as our modern language has come to define that term.

But what we lack, and sorely lack, is a commonly-accepted term to describe that area of human compositional activity which looks to produce "new" literary works. For lack of a better term, I want to use the term "literary theory" to denote that corpus of ideas concerned with future literary creations. It deals with future discourse, and is thus always addressed to what Donald A. Russell has recently termed the "potential practitioners" of the art of literary creation. It is not rhetoric, but perhaps a cousin of it.

Aristotle's Poetics, with its advice for the management of plot, character, and so forth, is

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a treatise of "literary theory," as is the Letter to the Pisos of Horace, who writes as if the two young brothers were about to write a new play. In both cases the emphasis is on what Douglas Kelly has so aptly called "The Future Poem." On the other hand Priscian's Duodecim, the lengthy analysis of the first twelve lines of Virgil's Aeneid, is an effort to make us appreciate the Aeneid we have--not to get us to produce another epic like it. The difference is profound.¹⁰

Aristotle and Horace both look to what is yet to be. Priscian looks at what already is.

When we turn to the Middle Ages, then, we face this question: How do we find out how medieval creators--I almost said writers--learned to move from nothing in their now to a literary creation in their future? This involves some other questions: What were their principles, their general methods and their specific techniques? Was there a single coherent body of literary theory common to the whole period from Augustine to Chaucer? Or, did literary theories (plural) vary from place to place, from nationality to nationality? Some have argued--O. B. Hardison among them--that Latin culture was so dominant that it is its history we should pursue to identify medieval concepts of literature: Is this really true, or do people like Guilhelm de Molinier, Dante, and Eustace Deschamps show us quite another approach to a theory of vernacular literatures?

There is an analogous question: For the Middle Ages, must the term "literature" include both the written and the oral? Brunetto Latini says of rhetoric in his Li livres dou Tresor (1260) that it takes two forms--by the hand in writing and by the mouth in speaking--but that the doctrine is common to both;¹¹ one hundred-twenty years later Deschamps in his

L'art dictier agrees, but adds that for the poet the speaking voice should be regarded as a branch of music.¹² Certainly if we define literature only in terms of those written texts that happen to have survived, we must rule out a great deal of orality simply because its medieval uses have not survived in any way that we can now investigate. But does that mean that we must therefore discount or ignore what the medieval creator may have had in mind? The oral sermon is one obvious example, but it is only one example--what of the creator of the spoken artifact for which no written record has survived? Recall that Geoffrey of Vinsauf regards the delivery--he does not say the writing--of a poem as only a final step, a sort of preservation of that which is invented and ordered and phrased.¹³ The whole apparatus of creation, for Vinsauf, does not depend on the mechanics of transcription (orthographia) in a written form. Yet it seems fair to say that Vinsauf's Poetria nova does present one type of literary theory aimed at the future poem--whether that poem gets written down for our modern anthologies or not.

The point is that a medieval literary theory, or theories, may well have led to creations which are for us no longer "artifacts" that can be studied. I would maintain that we still need to understand that particular literary theory, if we are to understand the Middle Ages, because that way of thinking about literature is surely an important aspect of medieval culture.

The basic question remains: How do we find out? To put it another way--what are you and I (the modern scholarly public, so to speak) prepared to accept as evidence?

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Have we been looking in the wrong places perhaps for a medieval version of Aristotle's Poetics?

Basically I propose an empirical approach: that we enter the investigation with as few assumptions as possible, and that we cast as wide a net as possible--that we seek out every relevant primary source and that we suspend our final judgment until we have collected every available scrap of evidence.

In this scheme of things our modern explanations and syntheses, at least for the moment, must be laid aside until they can be compared to other hypotheses that may spring from the evidence. We have already seen the fallacy of reading one early text, Augustine's De doctrina christiana, forwards into the whole Middle Ages as the Robertsonians would have it; presumably we now also see the hazard of reading modern ideas backwards into the Middle Ages, as some of the structuralists would have it. We have also, I hope, seen the folly of what I have sometimes called the sin of synecdoche mistakenly taking the part to be the whole--in which hordes of scholars pursue for a time one single idea which they hope can stand for the medieval whole. One example is the rush of the 1940's and 50's to search out tropes and figures everywhere, a movement which alas has merely tapered off but not died out. Modern overviews and surveys are, after all, merely hypotheses. I am proposing that we widen greatly the range of evidence upon which we base our hypotheses.¹⁴

Now, if we are to be empirical, and to accumulate evidence, we surely need to know what it is we are looking for. I take it as a principle, as I have said, that literary theory deals with future discourse. It would follow, then, that any medieval indication of thought about that process of future creation would be

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eligible for consideration as evidence. Those indications will undoubtedly be of two kinds: direct, as when Boccaccio defends inspiration as a mode of poetic invention, or indirect, as when the Scriptural exegete like Guibert of Nogent implies that his four-fold method of interpretation is universally applicable.

The search for those indications, those pieces of evidence, can be long and frustrating. I can testify to that, from personal experience.

At this point let me tell you how I became interested in this subject. Several years ago I had occasion to teach a graduate seminar in the Department of English at the University of California at Davis, and chose as its topic "Medieval Literary Theory." Until that time I had not, quite frankly, analyzed current scholarships in that area with any degree of vigor. I discovered, and my students discovered with me over ten weeks that the available resources are quickly exhausted by any serious investigator. My curiosity was piqued.

With all this in mind, then, let me call your attention to the following chart listing types of evidence. I have become convinced that any comprehensive understanding of medieval literary theory must, as a minimum, be based on all nine of the these types of evidence. They all contribute in various ways to the literary environment in which medieval creators created.

Until we can produce satisfactory examples of each of these types of evidence, I would argue we are in danger of repeating the literary sin of synecdoche by settling too soon for the partial.

This is a plan both vigorous and extensive. No one part can be overlooked; no one part can be treated superficially. It is a project neither quick nor easy. It has costs in both

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time and energy. The alternative, however, may be to overlook a rich vein of medieval thought.

NOTES

1. For bibliographical details of these works and others, see James J. Murphy, ed., Medieval Rhetoric: A Select Bibliography, 2nd ed. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1989) 18-30.
2. O. B. Hardison, Jr., "Toward a History of Medieval Literary Criticism," Medievalia et Humanistica NS 7 (1976): 1-12.
3. Hardison 2.
4. Alex Preminger, O. B. Hardison, Jr., and Kevin Kerrane, eds., Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations (New York: Ungar, 1974).
5. Hardison 5.
6. D. A. Russell, Criticism in Antiquity (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978) 3.
7. A. J. Minnis, Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages (London: Scolar, 1984).
8. Judson B. Allen, The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1982).
9. Alain Michel, La parole et la beauté: rhétorique et esthétique dans la tradition

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occidentale (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1982).

10. The Duodecim is a painstaking analysis of every word--case, number, gender, and relation to other words--as a segment of the ancient teaching exercise known as imitatio. In this exercise the teacher first read a text aloud, then analyzed it in detail to show how the writer carried out his plan. The text of Priscian's Partitiones duodecim versuum Aeneides principalium is in Henry Keil, ed., Grammatici Latini, vol. 3 (Leipzig, 1853-80) 459-515.
11. Or dist le mestres que le science de rectorique est in ii manieres, une ki est in disant de bouche et une autre que l'on mande par letres; mais li enseignement sont commun. Brunetto Latini, Li livres dou tressor, ed. Francis Carmody, vol. 3 University of California Publications in Modern Philology 22 (Berkeley: U of California P, 1948) 3.
12. Text in Eustache Deschamps, Oeuvres completes, ed. Gaston Raynaud, vol. 7 (Paris, 1891) 266-92.
13. "Read poorly, compositions have no more glory than has, read charmingly, a composition composed without reference to the principles that herein have gone before." Geoffrey of Vinsauf, The New Poetics, trans. Jane Baltzell Kopp, Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts, ed. James J. Murphy (Berkeley: U of California P, 1971) 106.

14. See, for example, the insights to be gained from examining medieval commentaries on a variety of texts: Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c. 1100-c. 1375: The Commentary Tradition, ed. A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott with the assistance of David Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

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Some Elements to be Considered

PRINCIPLE: Literary theory deals with future discourse--with what is yet to be written or said--and thus is addressed to what D.A. Russell has recently termed "potential practitioners" (Criticism in Antiquity, 1981, 2).

Survivals of Ancient Theoretical Statements

Theory Implicit in Ancient Criticism

Examples of Ancient Writers

Medieval Educational Practices

Commentary Methods: Scriptural and Secular

Specific Medieval Compositional Artes

Disputatio: Forms and Language

Medieval Theoretical Statements

Theory Enunciated or Implied in Literary Works