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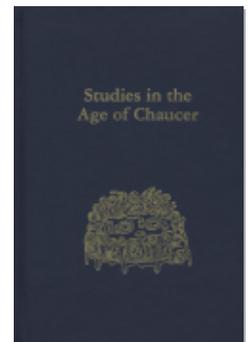
*Learning and Literacy in Medieval England and Abroad* ed. by  
Sarah Rees-Jones (review)

Joyce Coleman

*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, Volume 27, 2005, pp. 345-350 (Review)

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With all men, sage and churl and monk and mime,  
 Who knew not as we know the soul sublime,

and comments, “He further imparts that if ‘we’ cannot speak to Chaucer as did ‘sage and churl and monk and mime,’ we know (as they did not) Chaucer’s soul sublime.” Prendergast’s larger context implies that the Victorians did not understand Chaucer’s sublime soul either, whereas we understand both them and Chaucer; but they did at least evidently love and value the poet in ways that we have largely lost. “Sublime” is not a word in our own academic vocabulary. Stephanie Trigg’s recent study of the reception of Chaucer conveys much more sympathetically that urge to identify, to recover, to restore.

At the start of his coda, Prendergast asks, “Why have printers, poets, antiquarians and academics kept returning to Chaucer’s body?” Trigg’s work would suggest it is due to something unique about Chaucer. Prendergast explains his own return, “If this book has been about anything, it has been about how the corpse of the author and the corpus of his works are vitalized by a mortuary imaginary that is not limited to an academic understanding of fidelity and infidelity.” It is a covert recognition that an unfettered response can have more vitality than an academic one, and that the academic discourse of the book precludes any celebration of that vitality.

HELEN COOPER  
 Cambridge University

SARAH REES-JONES, ed. *Learning and Literacy in Medieval England and Abroad*. Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy 3. Turnhout: Brepols, 2003. Pp. 222. \$70.00.

The essays in this volume chronicle the slow expansion of literacy from a craft skill embedded in an imported language of power and prestige to a common capacity exercised across the multilingual landscape of medieval English society. Or so the chronological arrangement of the articles implies; the editorial intention is unclear since, oddly, the book contains not a word from Sarah Rees Jones. An anonymous three-paragraph preface explains that the volume was assembled “in celebration

of the thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of York,” and that most of its contributors “completed their post-graduate work at the University of York” (p. vii). (This is all we are told about them; there is no information on the current status or affiliation of the contributors.) The preface is followed by a short (four-page) introduction, written not by the editor but by an illustrious ringer, Derek Pearsall. Celebrating the Centre for its pioneering interdisciplinarity, Professor Pearsall identifies this volume’s focus on literacy—the question “How did people know what they knew and learn what they learnt?” (p. 2)—as a core issue for modern medieval studies.

It is ironic that a book apparently designed to trace the widening channels of medieval knowledge has so much the feeling of a coterie publication itself. Of course one can, and I did, read the articles and learn from them without knowing what the editor was thinking or who all the authors are. The lack of editorial care is visible in more crucial ways, however. Several papers could have used stronger copy-editing, and the proofreading has been similarly lax. Still more important, a few articles would have been considerably improved by tightening, trimming, and/or focusing—the sort of changes a good editor should suggest.

Only a few of the assembled articles address themselves explicitly to a wider context of theories about literacy. Katherine Zieman’s “Reading, Singing, and Understanding: Constructions of the Literacy of Women Religious in Late Medieval England” is, to my mind, the article that most satisfactorily combines theoretical sophistication with a broadly important discussion of a particular area of research. Zieman eschews any essentializing characterizations, offering her analysis of how nuns understood the liturgy they sang as a deep description of one particular form of literacy. Most of these nuns could read, memorize, and sing Latin, without understanding what it meant—a condition Zieman labels “liturgical literacy” (p. 106). The more educated male clerics, by contrast, possessed “grammatical literacy”; that is, they understood the literal and sometimes even the spiritual meaning of the Latin they were reading. Zieman traces the gradual encroachment of female religious into the male preserve of “understanding”—though for most, the best-case scenario was access to a book such as the *Myroure of Oure Ladye*, which explicated the liturgy in English.

Debbie Cannon’s “London Pride: Citizenship and the Fourteenth-

Century Customals of the City of London” offers a similarly stimulating combination of theoretical framework and detailed observation. Cannon uses her discussion of the customals compiled and donated to the Guildhall by the fishmonger Andrew Horn to challenge modern oppositions between public and private sphere, pragmatic and recreational reading, and customal and commonplace book. Cannon’s discussion of Horn’s wide-ranging compilations illuminates the role of literacy in the constitution of individual and civic identity.

What surprises me about John H. Arnold’s “‘A Man Takes an Ox by the Horn and a Peasant by the Tongue’: Literacy, Orality, and Inquisition in Medieval Languedoc” is less its inclusion in this otherwise England-focused anthology than the author’s apparent assumption that his call for a reconceptualization of “what ‘orality’ and ‘literacy’ mean in any given situation” (p. 39) is a new departure in medieval literacy studies. Arnold’s random collection of literary and anthropological citations overlooks Brian Street’s and Ruth Finnegan’s foundational ethnographies of the complexities and coexistences of literacy and orality—as well as this reviewer’s application of their insights to later medieval literary culture and D. H. Green’s extensive work on earlier periods (only one of Green’s articles is cited, in passing). Arnold uses the proverb of his title to demonstrate the “performative subjectivity” (p. 41) of the role of the (stupid, illiterate) peasant in the Albigensian Inquisition, illustrated via the story of a weaver who escaped with a relatively light punishment by playing off the inquisitor’s assumption that he was a foolish *rusticus*. We cheer for the weaver of course, but I am not sure the episode pivots on literacy. The weaver escaped because of his intelligence and his acting skills; the essentialism his story challenges is more his examiner’s reductive classism than our modern theories of modality. The actress Judy Holiday reportedly escaped the clutches of the House Un-American Activities Committee by playing the dumb blonde on the stand. Yet both Ms. Holiday and (one assumes) the members of HUAC were literate. This said, Arnold’s exposition of inquisitorial intricacies is itself a valuable ethnography of heresy.

The other articles in the anthology bypass any general theoretical discussion, offering instead illustrations of literacy in action in a particular time and context. In “Learning Latin in Anglo-Saxon England: Traditions, Texts, and Techniques,” Joyce Hill traces the antecedents and afterlife of Aelfric’s *Grammar*, the first surviving English-language guide to Latin, and of his *Colloquy*, a Latin text with an Anglo-Saxon gloss

added later. The last third of the article is devoted to a learned analysis of the manuscript tradition that will be most meaningful to fellow specialists. Janet Burton's "Selby Abbey and Its Twelfth-Century Historian" is enlivened by the story of the abbey's founder, a monk of Auxerre, who fled his monastery with a finger of Saint Germanus concealed, miraculously, in his arm. Burton's history of the *Historia Selebien-sis Monasterii* certainly involves and displays much learning, but it does not link that learning to literacy as the following contributions do.

In her investigation of advice written by Goscelin of St. Bertin, Aelred of Rievaulx, and Anselm for their spiritual or real sisters, Linda Olson refutes the easy assumption that clerical authors who appealed to "affection" when writing for women were talking down to them. Instead, her "Did Medieval English Women Read Augustine's *Confessiones*? Constructing Feminine Interiority and Literacy in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries" demonstrates that these authors were passing on an emotionality that Augustine himself championed, and that was embraced as a model for male religious as well. Only near its end does the article swerve toward its titular question. The awkward transition contributes to the impression that Olson was trying to cram a dissertation into these twenty-eight pages. The footnotes threaten at times to engulf the text; the sentences can run on for over a hundred words. Here is one place an editor's friendly intrusion could have helped considerably.

P. H. Cullum's title, "Learning to Be a Man, Learning to Be a Priest in Late Medieval England," and her introductory comments claim her article explores how literacy plays into the construction of priestly masculinity. Under that trendy camouflage lurks a more objective account, derived from probate registers of the archdiocese of York, of how married clerics and lay literates gradually displaced the higher orders of clergy from secular administration. Cullum does not need to glamorize or camouflage archival work of this quality—but she does need to work on her grammar. The article is littered with comma faults and other small errors that detract from an otherwise good essay. Another article drawing on York diocesan and other records is Stacey Gee's "Parochial Libraries in Pre-Reformation England." Gee finds that these libraries possessed more nonliturgical books than had previously been supposed. Gee's detailed data give interesting insight into the gifting of books to churches and their status and usage *in situ*.

Finally, a small number of the contributions fail to deliver much on

their promises; their articles seem more skimmed than dipped from the authors' well of learning. Pamela King's "The York Cycle and Instruction on the Sacraments" sets out to demonstrate the importance of the liturgy as an underlying structure of the York cycle plays. This turns into a checklist of sacraments and corresponding elements of plays. It is no surprise that the Baptism play concerns baptism, but the definitions get increasingly stretchy until any appearance of Christ on stage registers as an invocation of the Eucharist. The argument wavers and the connection to literacy is not that clear. Another formidable scholar not appearing at her best is Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, whose "The Women Readers in Langland's Earliest Audience: Some Codicological Evidence" jumps from premise to premise in an attempt to argue for female readership of Langland. Kerby-Fulton begins with the information that six manuscripts have women's names in them. This of course does not prove the women read the text. Next she remarks on the parallels between nuns' libraries and Langland's sources, disavows any suggestion that he used such a resource, declares (problematically) that his avoidance of classical sources suggests he was aiming at a mixed audience, and celebrates his concern for "single-parent heads of households"—an anachronism inappropriately equated to "poor women cottagers" (p. 126). When the article finally produces some solid evidence about female readership, it is from a manuscript created in 1532, which has five identifiable annotations by the copyist's wife. A reader from the eve of the Reformation can hardly be held to represent the "earliest audience" invoked in the article's title.

The cover illustration of this book shows Saint Anne teaching Mary to read, from a window in All Saints' Church in York. The Virgin's primer-text is a psalm, a written text meant to be read aloud (the words "exaudi" and "auribus" stand out clearly). Except for some passing comments in Cannon's article, however, none of the authors considers this practice of aurality—though it was one of the commonest means of experiencing every sort of literature throughout the Middle Ages. Nor does any article concern Anglo-Norman or French material, or come to grips with the interplay of England's three languages. If most of the articles in this volume stay with more traditional approaches to learning and literacy, however, they demonstrate that those traditions are still producing work of high value. The graceful image of Anne and Mary can also be seen to epitomize the combination of classic scholarly skills

with a search for broader meaning that characterizes this book's best work.

JOYCE COLEMAN  
University of North Dakota

JESÚS L. SERRANO REYES and ANTONIO R. LEÓN SENDRA, trans. *Geoffrey Chaucer: Cuentos de Canterbury*. Biblioteca Universal 24. Madrid: Gredos, 2004. Pp. 646. \$46.50.

Recent years have witnessed a revival of interest in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer in Spain that is best exemplified by the publication both of Sáez Hidalgo's annotated translation of *Troilus and Criseyde* (Madrid, 2001; reviewed in *SAC* 25) and of the first Catalan translation of the *Canterbury Tales* by Victòria Gual (Barcelona, 1998). With their collaborative translation of *The House of Fame* (Córdoba, 1999) and with several studies that explore the relation of Chaucer and of his texts with contemporary medieval Spain, the translators of the book reviewed here have in part contributed to this renewed attention to Chaucer. Their collaboration has now resulted in the addition of Chaucer's masterpiece to the prestigious series Biblioteca Universal Gredos, which aims at presenting the classics in careful versions and making them available to a wide reading public.

This handsomely produced volume opens with an introduction that, first, describes Chaucer's historical, social, and literary contexts; next, it contains an outline of his biography and literary career, and continues with a discussion of the textual, thematic, linguistic, metrical, and narrative aspects of *The Canterbury Tales*. It ends with a detailed and helpful chronology covering the period 1340–1400 and with an adequate selected bibliography. Especially relevant is the authors' consideration of the link—both historical and literary—between Chaucer and Spain: they hypothesize that Chaucer might have learned Castilian during his visit of 1366 (p. 18) and refer to Petrus Alphonsus, Ramon Llull, and Juan Manuel as possible influences (p. 19). Apropos of Juan Ruiz's *Libro del Buen Amor*, however, the authors state that “se han buscado semejanzas . . . sin resultados significativos” [p. 19; similarities have been sought without significant results], although a recent essay sheds new light on