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*Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* by  
Glending Olson (review)

Richard M. Piersol

*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, Volume 6, 1984, pp. 213-216 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1984.0021>



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medieval and world literature, or as background reading for English literature or Chaucer. With respect to the latter, it invites comparison with Robert Miller's *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds* (1977), at least with that work's one-hundred-page section entitled "Modes of Love." Miller deals minimally with lyric and does not give as generous a portion of Andreas as does O'Donoghue. Where Miller provides extracts from romances of Troy and antiquity, O'Donoghue's romance materials are of Arthur and Tristan. Miller's selections tend to emphasize the medieval misogynistic point of view, whereas O'Donoghue's give a much larger picture. It is odd that no women writers are represented.

MARCELLE THIÉBAUX  
St. John's University, New York

GLENDING OLSON, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages*. Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1982. Pp. 245. \$19.50.

In an essay published a decade ago, Donald Howard remarked that "we don't really understand the 'function' of poetry in various civilizations, or even at various periods of our own; and don't know why men write or read poems, not even why we do ourselves" ("Medieval Poems and Medieval Society," *M&H*, n.s., 3 [1972]: 111). Scholars have added to our understanding in recent years, notably in such studies as Richard Firth Green's *Poets and Princepleasers* (1980) and Janet Coleman's *English Literature in History, 1350-1400* (1981). Glending Olson's *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* deepens even further, and from a refreshing vantage point, our perception of the historical landscape on which literary critics now find themselves working. Howard's dust-jacket blurb announces the book as "a major historical discovery about the nature of late medieval literature, one of five or six such discoveries made in the present century. Glending Olson has produced not an interpretation or a theory but documented facts, facts that will alter

our understanding of what medieval writers and readers thought about literature." Curiosity about Howard's system of ranking aside, the characterization is perfectly right: *Literature as Recreation* is very much a book of facts, facts that are likely either to realign one's ideas about the ways medieval literature was thought about in its own time or to strengthen some basic assumptions about medieval attitudes to literature.

Olson's aim is "to redress an imbalance in modern scholarship that fosters, intentionally or not, the notion that medieval literary thought had nothing but indifference or contempt for the purely pleasurable" (p. 13). The point of departure is disarmingly simple: "Literature gives pleasure" (p. 19). Underlying this proposition for the Middle Ages, however, is a complex (and at times equally disarming) array of commentaries concerned not only with describing pleasure and its sources but, more important, with justifying pleasure, including that to be gained from literature. One assumes that there has never been any real doubt that the Middle Ages recognized, somehow or other, the existence of literary pleasure. Just how medieval writers and audiences dealt with pleasure is far more crucial to our understanding of their literature: "It is the justification of pleasure in terms of its effect on an audience that is the principal concern of this book. . . . How can pleasure be profitable?" (p. 35).

Olson begins by tracing the familiar path descending from Horace's comments on *prodesse* and *delectare* in *Ars poetica*. Although Horace clearly attributes the greatest value to poems that both delight and instruct, it was the non-Aristotelian disjunction of these capacities that opened the way for a pervasive medieval emphasis on the didactic role of literature (as, for example, in the commentary *On the Thebaid* attributed to Fulgentius the Mythographer), which has been ardently elaborated upon by D. W. Robertson and his followers. There are some important detours along this route, however, and it is in glimpsing them that we begin to see the landscape as Olson believes we should see it. Augustine, for example, at least recognizes that a fiction can be enjoyable without being pernicious (in his treatment of *fabula* in the *Soliloquia*), as do Isidore of Seville and Macrobius (in the *Satumalia*). Less

well-known commentators, among them John of Capua and Dominicus Gundissalinus, feel the same way.

The real achievement of *Literature as Recreation* is its detailed exposition of hygienic (ultimately medical) and recreational (invariably ethical) theories on the benefits of pleasure. Among the headings in medieval medical treatises appears *res non naturales*, the “non naturals,” a category comprising “a set of factors external to the body itself but which affect bodily health depending on how they are used.” These include such influences as diet and sleep, as well as accidents of the soul, “*accidentia animae*, what today we would call the emotions” (p. 42). The connection between the enjoyment of literature and the restoration of emotional health, frequently only implied, occasionally becomes explicit, as in a fifteenth-century revision of the thirteenth-century *Régime du corps*, by Aldobrandino of Siena, and in physicians’ *consilia* (reports on specific cases, which typically include a prescribed regimen “based on the nonnaturals”). Support comes also from treatments of *theatrica*, the science of entertainments, as developed in the *Didascalicon*, and of *confabulatio*, which, essentially, is conversation. But the boundaries of these areas are sometimes blurred, which prompts Olson to help us define them. On theatrics: “Much of what is classified as entertainment seems to belong to what we call medieval literature” (p. 74).

The question of recreation, the enjoyment of a story (or anything else) apparently for its own sake, will obviously have cried out to medieval commentators for ethical justification. Fortunately “the essence of the recreational argument” comes from no less an authority than Aquinas: “Those words and deeds in which nothing is sought beyond the soul’s pleasure are called playful or humorous, and it is necessary to make use of them at times for solace of soul.” In Olson’s words, “Play is justified because of its value as recreation” (p. 98); occasional release is necessary, for the same reason that a bow must sometimes be unbent if it is to maintain its strength.

Olson concentrates on essentially nondidactic literary works, because it is they, in an age in which “profit was always more respectable than pleasure,” that most need defending. Not surprisingly, the *Decameron* receives the most attention. If there was ever any

doubt that this narrative, which moves us "from plague to pleasure," has a therapeutic aim among its more exclusively literary concerns, such doubt should be weakened in light of early commentary on the work, and particularly in light of the "plague tracts," treatises concerned specifically with means of surviving the plague, one of which was to encourage cheerfulness with "songs, stories, and melodies." There is relatively little on Chaucer in Olson's book, though there is some fresh insight into the relation between the narrator's melancholy in *The Book of the Duchess* and his subsequent turning to a book for solace.

*Literature as Recreation* is a dense and intricately argued book, but it is demanding without being tiresome. Those who choose to use it for "reference," or to enter its argument by way of the index, will do so at their own peril, for it is the relatedness of the materials Olson presents, the recurrent qualification of one position by another, that lend the book its authority. If Olson's connections between theory and practice are sometimes tenuous, they may help us appreciate the dilemma of thoughtful persons during a crucial phase of intellectual history: "The expanded secular culture of the later Middle Ages still relies heavily on the recreational idea to understand and justify its interest in worldly pleasures. It does not yet give those pleasures independent status as goods in themselves" (p. 232).

RICHARD M. PIERSOL

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

RUSSELL A. PECK, ed., *Chaucer's Lyrics and "Anelida and Arcite": An Annotated Bibliography, 1900 to 1980*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983. Pp. xx, 226. \$36.00.

Peck's bibliography is the first in a new series, The Chaucer Bibliographies, under the general editorship of A. J. Colaianne and R. M. Piersol, of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. As set out in the General Editors' Preface, the series is designed to