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Medieval Autographies: The “I” of the Text by A. C.
Spearing (review)

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Although Franke's argument is insightful, some of the terms he uses and their relationships to one another are unclear. For example, Franke states that part 1 and part 2 are connected by Dante's use of theological language to transgress human authority, but he does not provide a clear definition of theological language. In the preface, Franke refers to inner experience as a *consequence* of his argument about transgression, but at the beginning of part 3, he describes it as, for Bataille and Blanchot, a *type* of transgression that does not defy any specific authority but rather denies "any positive attempt to establish order" at all (133). Franke does not clarify how inner experience relates to transcendence. Though Franke informs the reader at the beginning that his approach is theoretical and that a more analytical book will follow, I found myself wishing for greater textual analysis. Even Franke admits that his argument about *Paradiso* is incomplete without this second volume.

Despite these shortcomings, Franke's argument for Dante's boldness as a poet and a Christian serves as an important contribution to Dante scholarship. In his reading of *Paradiso*, Franke takes Dante's insistence of inexpressibility seriously, an insistence that even as insightful a critic as Robert Hollander, whom Franke references, has found tiresome. By joining medieval apophatism and postmodern deconstructionism, Franke shows that the topos of inexpressibility and the understanding of God it entails are integral to Dante's purpose in the *Paradiso*. Dante, one of the most cataphatic of poets, ultimately shows that even the most daring linguistic ventures cannot express the utterly transcendent and infinite God.

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Medieval Autographies: The "I" of the Text. By A. C. Spearing. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. ISBN 0-268-01782-4. Pp. viii + 347. \$32.00.

In his most recent book, A. C. Spearing essentially argues that in medieval literature the first-person singular possessive pronoun, "I," is merely grammatical (or, more accurately, deictic). Put another way, he suggests that one should not assume that the narrator of a medieval poem has a persona—particularly of a Jamesian variety. Some readers might be inclined to dismiss this thesis *prima facie* (especially as presented in the first formulation above). Others may deem it self-evident (especially as presented in the second). Still others may presume that Spearing is more concerned with being interesting than truthful. But when one returns to Spearing's other work, one realizes that (as Spearing claims) such a thesis has been fermenting in his mind for some time, and it has arguably led him to valuable insights into medieval poetry.

Therefore, this is not a book to be set aside; it is, rather, one that merits serious consideration.

In the opening sentence of his first chapter, “The Textual First Person,” Spearing asserts that in this book he will discuss “a category of medieval English writing that has not previously been recognized” (1). In the second, he names this category “autography,” explaining that “it consists of extended, non-lyrical, fictional writings in and of the first person” (1). After defining his terms and scope, Spearing briefly discusses how this book relates to another of his books, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (2005). He then explains that the basic argument of that book “underlies the present book” (5) but that, in this book, his focus is not on lyric or narrative, per se, but another genre (or supergenre [1]). Autography, Spearing argues, “began to emerge in French in the thirteenth century but in English not till the fourteenth” (5-6). French scholars, he says, call this supergenre the *dit*. Admitting that his approach may be a bit circuitous at times, Spearing hopes his reader will accept his invitation to “share in the experiment of seeing texts of a certain kind ... as constituting a significant cluster or family, and thus ... [interpret] them in a different way” (6). He is quick to warn that he is not “purporting to offer a comprehensive theory” but “only offering an invitation to try out a different kind of reading” (6).

Moving from the general to the particular, from the theoretical to the practical, Spearing explains that autography encompasses texts such as “Chaucer’s dream poems, *Piers Plowman*, *Pearl*, prologues by Chaucer and his followers, [and] extensive first-person commentaries on heterodiegetic narratives, again by Chaucer and his followers” (8). The emergence of these texts some three centuries after the Norman Conquest, Spearing argues, is significant, and while he recognizes that a kind of autography existed before the Conquest (in poems such as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*), he limits his use of the term “medieval,” for the purposes of this book, to “the period between the Conquest and the Reformation” (8). Autography, Spearing says, “seems to enter literature in English through the Anglo-French literary culture that developed at the court of King Edward III” (9).

The textual status of autographic poems is important to Spearing, for he recognizes that autography “has a strong tendency to be *about* writing” even though “[m]uch medieval literature was orally delivered” (9). Therefore, it is important that “[t]he first-person pronoun works differently in writing from the way it works in speech” (9). For example, when a person speaks the word “I,” it is clear to that person’s audience who is talking and, thus, to whom the “I” refers, but, in the words of Spearing, “when I *write* ‘I,’ the word does not emerge from anyone’s mouth, and its deictic energy—the energy of pointing, looking, feeling, imagining—is freed for a wider variety of expressive purposes” (10). Recognizing this distinction, Spearing concludes that “although the textual ‘I’ ... cannot be literally identical with the author, that does not mean that it must represent a self-consistent imaginary person distinct from the author” (14). This statement, it seems to me, is the primary thesis of Spearing’s book.

In the subsequent chapters, Spearing mostly considers a variety of medieval texts with this thesis in mind. In chapter two, "Autography: Prologues and *Dits*," Spearing distinguishes between autography and autobiography (33-38), explains the autographic nature of prologues (38-53), and discusses the French *dit* at some length (53-61). In this chapter, Spearing laments that "some of the most sophisticated modern criticism of *The Canterbury Tales* continues to substitute the imagined inner lives of the tellers for the texts of their stories" (41) because of "the unquestioned dogma that the textual first person must necessarily give voice to an individual human consciousness" (51). Thus, it seems that Spearing's primary motivation in writing this book is to encourage his readers to see medieval autographic writings as poems rather than as insights into the psychologies of fictional persons.

In chapter three, "Chaucerian Prologues and the Wife of Bath," Spearing confronts Chaucer's most memorable tale-teller, "probably the Chaucerian figure readers have most liked to think of as having a real existence outside the text" (69). Spearing's primary argument in this chapter is that the Wife of Bath is a text, not a person. He points out that "*The Canterbury Tales* creates a fictional effect of orality and community, but it does not conceal the fact that the means by which the effect is produced is textual and solitary" (68). He argues that *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* presents its "I" "in ways that only writing makes possible" (68); indeed, Hoccleve, whom Spearing discusses in subsequent chapters, "thinks of the Wife as a text" (71), for he "associates her not with speech or voice but with 'wordes writen,' 'scripture,' 'wrytyng'" (72). For Spearing, the Wife of Bath does not even have as much of a "real existence outside the text" as the characters of modern novels, for "Chaucer's gestures toward verisimilitude do not amount to ... novelistic realism" (82-83). Thus, Spearing's argument in this chapter is consistent with his argument throughout the book: medieval poems are not like modern novels, and readers of medieval poems should approach them as poems.

After discussing the Wife of Bath (and Chaucerian prologues in general), but before moving on to Hoccleve, Spearing pauses, in chapter four, to consider the appeal of autography in the period in question, asking, "Why Autography?" He suggests that autography might be one stage in the development of autobiography, which "in the sense in which we now understand it did not yet exist" (99). He also suggests that an interest in autography might be related to "freedom of composition" (103). Although it may be true that, because they generally confined themselves to "fixed patterns" (102), the freedom of composition available to medieval authors was largely limited to details (104-5), Spearing argues that Chaucer and other poets of the period delighted in "the riskiness of free composition" (119), a riskiness that could be found in autography because the autographic "I" is unstable and unfixed.

Suggesting that Hoccleve learned autography from Chaucer's writings (129), in chapter five, "Hoccleve and the Prologue," and chapter six, "Hoccleve's *Series*," Spearing shows how Hoccleve employed autography both in prologues and in the

“last and most peculiar of [his] major works in English” (171), the *Series*. Focusing on the preamble to Hoccleve’s *Regement of Princes* in chapter five, Spearing suggests that to enjoy Hoccleve one must appreciate the lack of unity in his work (139). Although Hoccleve’s autography sometimes seems autobiographical (145), Hoccleve seems to present multiple versions of himself (146-7). And although we tend to conceive of writing as imitation of speech (166), Hoccleve’s dialogue is textual, “composed out of fragments of other texts, predominantly Chaucerian” (169). According to Spearing, Hoccleve’s *Series* exhibits many of the features present in the preamble to his *Regement*, but in the *Series* Hoccleve also seems interested in creating an “improvisatory effect, by which we seem able to enter into the very process by which the text was produced” (177). Books are shown to be as unstable as humans (190). Writing, a private activity, is shown to be an image of the inner life (191).

From Hoccleve, someone he sees as one of Chaucer’s “sons,” Spearing moves on to Bokenham, whom he sees as one of Chaucer’s “grandsons,” discussing “Bokenham’s Autographies” in chapter seven (209), particularly his *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* (210). Spearing thinks it may be a mistake to search for what unifies Bokenham’s *Legends* (216), for the true pleasure of Bokenham’s work is “the evocation of experientiality that it makes possible” (217). For Spearing, “first-person interventions” in Bokenham’s *Legends* “foreground ... the role of the poet as translator and commentator, at work in a present that runs alongside the past of the narratives” (225). Thus, “Bokenham uses autography to emphasize the human origin of the literary work” (230).

In his Afterword, Spearing mentions other medieval texts that he thinks should be read autographically (such as *Piers Plowman*, parts of *Troilus and Criseyde*, and John Skelton’s *Speke Parott*), concluding by stating that he hopes his book will lead others to improve their readings of these and other medieval poems. My own hope is that his will be realized. Since Spearing is introducing a new way of reading medieval texts, there is much work to be done if his approach is valid, which it seems to be. Indeed, Spearing’s approach is of the best kind, for (as his thirty-five pages of notes and twenty-five-page bibliography demonstrate) it is informed by many critical methods, such as New Criticism, deconstruction, and reader response (though he tends to distance himself from psychological and new-historicist readings). Ultimately, though, it is probably best categorized as a work of genre studies. One wonders if Spearing may overstate his case at times, taking on the Wife of Bath, for instance, rather than one of Chaucer’s other pilgrims, but one can see even in what may be overstatement something like the movement toward the Aristotelian mean. And although it is unclear to me why Spearing focused on Hoccleve and Bokenham rather than, say, the other texts he mentions in the Afterword, there are limits to what can be said in a single volume (as Spearing asserts when referring to *Piers Plowman*), and the book may retain traits of *The Conway Lectures in Medieval Studies* (2008), out of which it was born and the

contexts of which I am unaware. I for one look forward to seeing how reading and re-reading medieval poems with Spearing's ideas in mind will enhance my appreciation of their composition and poetic craft as I learn to pay attention to deixis and the potential instability of the "I" of medieval texts.

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In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts. By C. S. Song. Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co., 2012. ISBN 978-0-227-68023-0 Pp. vii-172. \$18.90.

Choan-Seng Song is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Theology and Asian Cultures at the Pacific School of Religion in San Francisco. His book *In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts* seeks to challenge "Western biblical scholars and theologians who have monopolized the interpretation of the Bible" (115). He desires to throw "wide open the door of interpretation to men and women from outside the West, to people of different ethnic origins and cultural backgrounds, to women as well men, to the powerless over against those who hold power, whether political, social, religious, or academic" (115). Here is how Song structures the book to accomplish his goal.

The book consists of ten tightly integrated chapters and a bibliography. Chapter headings include, "In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts," "Story Is the Matrix of Theology," "Theology Rewrites Stories," "Stories Rectify Theology," "The Theological Power of Stories," "In Search of Our Roots," "Stories within a Story," "Stories Are Culturally Distinctive," "Stories Can Be Theologically Interactive."

The final chapter, "The Bible, Stories, and Theology," provides the reader "approaches" to pursue theology conceived in stories inside and outside of Scripture. Chapter 10 answers this question, "How is ... intense theology to be born out of the matrix of stories?" (152). The first step of story theology is, "Awareness of the theological nature of stories" (155).

For Song, "story is the matrix of theology" (18). This axiom drives his book, challenging the Western penchant for systematic theology. He raises some intriguing questions to make his case, "Who says theology has to be ideas and concepts? Who has decided that theology has to be doctrines, axioms, propositions?" (6). Song's conclusion? "God is not concept; God is story. God is not idea; God is presence. God is not hypothesis; God is experience. God is not principle; God is life." He adds, "theology worthy of its name has to be part and parcel of the dramas of life and faith" (116).

Song ably answers the above questions in the book. And his story-based