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The Medieval Literary

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IN RECENT YEARS, scholars working in a range of periods have begun to talk about aesthetics, form, and “the literary” in reanimated ways. A new emphasis, if not a movement, has emerged, in which what counts as distinctly literary form and as the very category of literature is receiving attention with a focus and energy suggesting a major reorientation of a number of familiar approaches, including historicism, theory, and gender studies. Such developments have proven immensely productive, and have already begun to generate historical and theoretical reflections on the critical shift itself. With very few exceptions, however, the scholars building and mapping this new emphasis have paid scant notice to medieval literary scholarship, much less the Middle Ages.¹ This raises interesting theoretical and historical questions. Are, for instance, either the “premodern” materials or the ways in which they have been approached so stubbornly distinct from postmedieval things of all kinds? If so, one might wonder, is there any special value that such other-

1. See especially Marjorie Levinson, “What Is New Formalism?” *PMLA* 122 (March 2007): 558-69. As Grady’s essay in chapter 9 below notes, mention of a single medievalist, Katherine O’Brien O’Keefe, appears in a bibliographical appendix, in a section entitled “Alternative Solutions to Problems Raised by New Formalism,” found at sitemaker.umich.edu/pmla_article. For a thoughtful reassessment of the role of earlier “literary theory” in this new emphasis, see also Jonathan Culler, *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

ness—in approach and materials—might offer? Would a renewed emphasis on “the literary” (however we choose to define that) help us appreciate these earlier periods in new ways? Or should, perhaps, the methods currently available for postmedieval works treated in this vein be altered in some way to suit those materials? If so, how?

These are questions that this volume both directly and indirectly pursues. But this volume is also predicated on the point that these questions have already long been pursued by medievalists. Here we return to the question of why such inquiries have gone unremarked by scholars of later periods. Essays explicitly on the medieval ideas of “the literary” have increasingly appeared in recent years, often including a wide range of scrutiny of how focus on historicism or theory or gender studies can aid or occlude this attention. Moreover, those recent inquiries among medievalists are in turn building on decades of medieval scholarship that has aimed at some of the same topics. Indeed, since at least the 1970s—before the topic became central to Renaissance studies (and well before Stephen Greenblatt’s provocative 1997 essay on the emergence of the literary in the Renaissance as a form of “cultural capital”²)—medieval studies has centrally pursued ways of understanding “the literary” and the distinctive powers and implications of literary form. Yet here medievalists may share some responsibility for the invisibility of their attention to this topic, at least to critics of later periods. However legion the ingenious and wide-ranging work on this topic by medievalists, however deep the critical roots, no wide-ranging conference, monograph, or collection of essays has addressed this topic for medieval literature overtly or in any significant breadth of scope and theoretical approach. Given the potential interest for all concerned, it seems high time such a volume were assembled.

One reason medievalists have not done so before may be the very richness of their scholarly and critical lineage. Although the focus on this topic is explicit and pervasive in medieval literary essays in recent years, the lineage of attention to this in medieval literary criticism extends much further. The questions framed above have been with us in medieval studies for a long time, and what is “new” about this book is not simply its posing them. In fact, to offer a collection on this topic as if no earlier treatments of the issue existed in medieval criticism would be as misleading as the elision in postmedieval accounts of the current trends in medieval criticism. Scattered essays on “the medieval literary” continue to appear in numbers, but all such work proceeds with a sense of continuing and developing a set of questions, and refining a range of complex literary and nonliterary materials, that medievalists have

2. Stephen Greenblatt, “What Is the History of Literature?” *Critical Inquiry* 23 (1997): 460-81.

been working on for decades. This offers grounds not for announcing a new movement, but instead for taking stock of some major earlier tributaries to this focus, and for defining and demonstrating new possibilities.

Recalling a body of previous work on which literary criticism remains dependent, even while we are engaged in advancing these pursuits in new ways, is regularly necessary at moments of rapid disciplinary shift and growth. An important opportunity to pursue this dual goal for this topic was a conference organized by Steven Justice and Maura Nolan at the University of California, Berkeley, on "Form after Historicism," in honor of Anne Middleton on the occasion of her retirement as the Florence Green Bixby Professor of English. At this conference were first presented a number of the papers—many by those who have known or been taught by Anne—that were then substantially revised and rewritten for this volume. To this core were joined a number of other original essays from scholars making notable contributions to the topic of "the medieval literary," and who were moreover explicitly attentive to the debt their work owes to Middleton's approaches to this issue. The essays generally, though not exclusively, treat the later fourteenth-century poetry of Chaucer, Langland, and Gower, where this topic has been most often elaborated and where Middleton's own work has made the most significant contributions. The essays also and by design speak to a wide range through the premodern centuries, focusing on various interacting traditions and linguistic spheres. By these means it is hoped that this collection can be instructive for medievalists of all kinds as well as those working well beyond medieval contexts and medievalists' debates.

Middleton's work serves exceedingly well both as a guiding light and an opportunity for such a venture. The volume's title "Answerable Style" does not simply evoke Milton's meditation on the problem of a proper genre to describe the Fall (*Paradise Lost* 9.20); it also alludes to an early essay by Middleton on the stylistic responses to different purposes and audiences by the Old English homilist Ælfric.³ By both lineages the term remains apt for considering the idea of the medieval literary, both as that has developed through a series of contextual pursuits and as that is now in the process of displaying new formations, answering to new developments, and posing new questions for further responses. For Middleton, "form" has long been central to literary study, as well as what may best be called a distinctive literary ethics, the "good" of literature. These elements reach deeply in her work into literary, legal, and other kinds of cultural spheres. Her emphases on "the liter-

3. "Ælfric's Answerable Style: The Rhetoric of the Alliterative Prose," *Studies in Medieval Culture* 4 (1973 [1968]): 83–91. The dissertation was "The 'English Ways' of Ælfric's Prose," Harvard University, 1966.

ary” and the idea of medieval literature have persistently posited a culturally wide reach, while opening up or returning to the central questions that now seem taken up everywhere in modern literary studies. In her work, attention to “the literary” typically unfolds it as a transmitter and emitter of meaning rather than some “reflection” or homology of its social contexts, for which literature serves, as she has repeatedly showed, as a focus of reinterpretation as well as a good in its own right.⁴

As should be clear already, her work is far from alone in defining this set of topics, nor is this volume inspired solely by her continuing body of writings. Other enduring reference points in this topic are studies by Lee Patterson, Ralph Hanna, and David Lawton, to name just a few of the most often cited critics—all three of whom present contributions here.⁵ These and others have long focused on Middle English poetry as a place for querying and verifying the “good” of literature and the idea of the medieval literary as a general and long-term issue. Middleton, however, has pursued these topics with special richness and intensity. Her work’s distinctiveness is not simply a particularly rich critical style but also a characteristically multisided mode of perception, by which she has consistently both brought the properties of literature to new focus and showed how those created and responded to cultural conditions. Her treatments of *Piers Plowman* are particularly notable contributions in this vein—helping bring into central view a poem that was declared (by a noted medievalist formalist) a singularly shapeless poem, the barometer of an “age of crisis”—to show, for instance, how its ambient energies for renewal of received didactic traditions lead to its repeated breakdowns and reassemblies.⁶ Her distinctive mode of perception is similarly apparent in her many influential demonstrations of how form reflects generic innovation and combination, as in her influential focus on the use in *Piers* of a brief, lyrical mode, found in English as well as French poetry. She was the

4. See, e.g., Anne Middleton, “Chaucer’s ‘New Men’ and the Good of Literature in the *Canterbury Tales*,” in *Literature and Society*, ed. Edward Said (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 15–56.

5. Patterson’s first work on this may be epitomized by his book *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Lawton’s may be epitomized by his essay “Dullness and the Fifteenth Century,” *ELH* 54 (1987): 761–99. Hanna’s key early studies, spanning a number of years, may be epitomized by his collection in *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

6. For Middleton’s most overtly formalist essay, see “Narration and the Invention of Experience: Episodic Form in *Piers Plowman*,” in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays on Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), 91–122, 280–83. The earlier comment is that of Charles Muscatine, *Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), repr. in *Medieval Literature, Style, and Culture: Essays by Charles Muscatine* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 111–38.

first to argue that Langland abstracted this into a formal device for continuously rethinking the traditional topics that his poetry took up.⁷

Middleton has made foundational contributions also to distinctive properties of "the literary" as a defining feature of late-medieval English culture in general. This is clear from what remains possibly her most famous essay, on "the idea of public poetry in the reign of Richard II," the period of Chaucer, Langland, and so many other major poets. Her comments there have so influentially shaped how we understand that period itself, as well as how any period can be linked to distinctive terms of "the literary," that it deserves quoting at length:

The public poetry of the Ricardian period is best understood not as poetry "about" contemporary events and abuses, whether viewed concretely or at a distance, from the vantage point of a universal scheme of ideal order—it is rarely occasional or topical, and it is indifferent on the whole to comprehensive rational systems of thought or of poetic structure. Rather it is poetry defined by a constant relation of speaker to audience within an ideally conceived worldly community, a relation which has become the poetic subject. In describing their mode of address, the poets most often refer to the general or common voice, and the ideal of human nature that sustains this voice assigns new importance to secular life, the civic virtues, and communal service. The voice of public poetry is neither courtly, nor spiritual, nor popular. It is pious, but its central pieties are worldly felicity and peaceful, harmonious communal existence. It speaks for bourgeois moderation, a course between the rigorous absolutes of religious rule on the one hand, and, on the other, the rhetorical hyperboles and emotional vanities of the courtly style.⁸

These remarks, which take their departure from John Burrow's important book *Ricardian Poetry*, reach back to the perspectives of Jacob Burckhardt, Johan Huizinga, Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach, and Kenneth Burke, and outward to the culturally oriented art historical aesthetics of Michael Baxandall and others. Their direct and indirect ramifications extend to much recent work. Directly important for extending these views has been Lawton's key

7. "The Audience and Public of *Piers Plowman*," in *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and Its Literary Background: Seven Essays*, ed. David Lawton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982), 101–23, 147–54. The notion there has been influential in many kinds of study of *Piers* as well as of other medieval English narratives; for its sustained further application to *Piers*, see, e.g., D. Vance Smith, *The Book of the Incipit: Beginnings in the Fourteenth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

8. Anne Middleton, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," *Speculum* 53 (1978): 95.

essay on the uses of “dullness” in post-Ricardian literature to create a kind of literary discourse that, by denying its originality of artistry, particularly secured the domain of “the public sphere” described by the writers on whom Middleton focused.⁹ So too, Patterson’s work on Chaucer seminally attended to the formal ways in which Chaucer’s narratives create room for subjectivity, self-criticism, and delay in the larger purposes of Christian and courtly ideologies, in an approach that owed much to Middleton’s; and in recent years Patterson returned to focus in similar ways on the formal properties of poetry fully invested in particular ideologies and contexts, but capable of opening those up for wider uses.¹⁰ In a different way, David Carlson has shown how the Latin poetry of the same period shows the principles of “public poetry” that Middleton described; other scholars have continued to extend the chronological horizons of these issues. As Lawton looked toward the fifteenth century, so David Matthews has described the national public sphere or “common voice” before Ricardian literature, focusing on the topical political writings in Latin, French, and English from the mid-thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth century.¹¹

The ramifications of these topics also extend to something quite new in the proliferating approaches to these issues, and in the broad project of contemplating the “good” of literature in medieval culture. Smoothly as it emerges from prior work, that novelty can be glimpsed in the leaps in historical period being made—an approach that, for instance, James Simpson presents in a study joining Gower’s late fourteenth-century *Confessio Amantis* to the twelfth-century *De Planctu Naturae* of Alan de Lille, that Carolyn Dinshaw proposes in a study linking medieval and modern approaches to how sexuality defines historical communities and the uses of literature, and that Paul Strohm suggests on theoretical grounds in general.¹² Other work

9. Lawton, “Dullness in the Fifteenth Century.”

10. Lee Patterson, “Court Politics and the Invention of Literature: The Case of Sir John Clanvowe,” in *Culture and History, 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing*, ed. David Aers (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 7–42, repr. in Lee Patterson, *Acts of Recognition: Essays on Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 56–83.

11. David Carlson, “The Invention of the Anglo-Latin Public Poetry (circa 1367–1402) and Its Prosody, Esp. in John Gower,” *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 39 (2004): 389–406; David Matthews, *Writing to the King: Nation, Kingship, and Literature in England, 1250–1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

12. James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille’s “Anticlaudianus” and John Gower’s “Confessio”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

has stressed how literary texts formally, psychoanalytically, and in other ways tend to resist simple historical placement—a principle that guides a wide range of essays in a volume edited by Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Federico. On Gower, Malte Urban (like Maura Nolan, in the collection just mentioned) has argued for a shattering of historical context and teleology to match the disruptions of history that Gower's poetics presents.¹³ Still other work has more directly emphasized the primacy of the aesthetic. Peggy Knapp has engaged the concerns of New Formalists to return to a careful reading of Chaucer in emphatically "aesthetic" terms, including his crafting of an imagined community as a work of art.¹⁴

Much other work on medieval texts and culture has sought to revive formalism as a subtle historical instrument, with a new mandate to identify the nature and conditions of the literary that result from works' social and historical visions and functions. If postmedieval literary studies have recently begun to assess "the literary in theory," in Jonathan Culler's apt phrase, many studies of medieval literature may be said to be seeking the literary in history.¹⁵ The emphasis is clear in the burgeoning pursuits of medieval "literary theory" (both within and outside of literary works themselves) and the Latin commentary tradition. Study of the latter has been reinvigorated by Alastair Minnis especially, as well as by Rita Copeland, who contributes the opening essay here. Other studies have pursued the historical implications of poetry that seems to question and resist its historical contexts, dialectically positioning itself above as well as in conversation with its immediate social setting in a way deemed essential to the properties of the "literary" as we understand that, as Patterson found the short Chaucerian poem *The Boke of Cupide* by John Clanvowe to do in both inhabiting and criticizing the courtly traditions of literature. In similarly social but not merely "symptomatic" terms others have excavated the "poetry of praise," as John Burrow has; or pursued the "natural history of form," as Christopher Cannon does through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to show the gradual remaking of a notion of English literary status after the shattering consequences of the Norman Conquest; or the "job" of poetry defined by Chaucer and his followers that, as David Carlson has argued, conditioned its contemporary and later readers to adapt to a world of new bourgeois domination yet continued servility to a steeply

13. Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Federico, eds., *The Post-Historical Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Malte Urban, *Fragments: Past and Present in Chaucer and Gower* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008).

14. Peggy Knapp, *Chaucerian Aesthetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

15. Culler, *The Literary in Theory*. See also his "Introduction: Critical Paradigms," to the special issue of *PMLA*, "Literary Criticism for the Twenty-First Century," vol. 125 (2010): 905–15.

hierarchical state; or the transformation of the idea of making literature as a form of “labor,” as Kellie Robertson has explored that through Langland, Chaucer, and their contemporaries and followers, who blur the line separating intellectual from material endeavor in order to solidify the culture authority of their own writing and literature itself; or Lydgate’s balancing of human agency with accidental contingency to create both “public culture” and a particularly “poetic form of ambiguity” across his writings, as Maura Nolan has shown; or again, Lydgate’s establishment of a quasi-sacred force for vernacular “high style” in the *Life of Our Lady*, whose signal though fast-vanishing importance Robert Meyer-Lee has charted.¹⁶ For these, and many others that might be mentioned, history is not some reductive explanation of the literary; rather, putting the literary into the historical is a means for rethinking both.

Middleton would not necessarily endorse all these positions, just as she would not necessarily grant the lineage in which I have loosely situated her work. Like all genealogies, histories of medieval criticism (to which Middleton herself has made important contributions¹⁷) are framed more or less self-consciously from the perspective of present viewers. In an important sense, this volume, like the conference at which its idea began, is a tribute to a scholar whose contributions have shaped the thought and vocations of many medieval literary scholars, including all those whose chapters are represented here. But, in a fuller tribute, this volume seeks to assess the impact of the ideas with which that scholar has been most associated, guided by a topic woven through both medieval and modern literary scholarship at present as it grapples with enduring questions of the critical enterprise.

THE VOLUME’S ESSAYS are divided into two broad categories. These are meant to evoke two basic medieval literary situations on which the volume’s topic depends. The first, titled “The Literary between Latin and Vernacular,” might be further glossed by Rita Copeland’s title, “The Medieval Classroom

16. J. A. Burrow, *The Poetry of Praise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Christopher Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); David Carlson, *Chaucer’s Jobs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Kellie Robertson, *The Laborer’s Two Bodies: Labor and the ‘Work’ of the Text in Medieval Britain, 1350-1500* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Maura Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Robert J. Meyer-Lee, “The Emergence of the Literary in John Lydgate’s *Life of Our Lady*,” *JEGP* 109 (2010): 322–48.

17. Especially Anne Middleton, “Medieval Studies,” in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association, 1992), 12–40.

and Beyond." The essays in part 1 of this volume take the basic relation between Latin and vernacular literary production as their starting point, and from there trace a wide range of forms and conditions of the medieval literary. The first two essays, by Copeland and Wendy Scase, take up most directly the schoolroom definitions and guides of "literature" in order to view from new angles what might be called the contact zone between learned, clerical culture and vernacular English poetry. Treating the most canonical guide in Western culture to ideas of "the literary," Copeland recovers the medieval reception of Horace's *Ars poetica*, pedagogically potent even as it was displaced in many of its roles by Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova*. Scase, going yet further beyond the "classroom" but keeping its intellectual impress clearly in view, explores the grammar-school arts of composition to establish the context for what she argues is a vernacular citational style used heavily by Langland's followers in the "*Piers Plowman* tradition"—in which his text may even have been treated as a work for memorization and other manipulations and interpretations adapted from the schooltext tradition. Scase thus uses rhetorical evidence to posit a remarkable new claim about this poem's authority in some settings.

The other essays in part 1 take up wider horizons of such Latin nurseries of the medieval literary and display a further range of methods, discoveries, and new implications. Traugott Lawler sets forth a detailed range of poetic instances of the contact between Latin and English in an astounding plethora of new discoveries showing Langland's renderings of Latin into English as a central principle of the composition of *Piers Plowman*. The transparency of the Latin materials through the English verse defines a mode of literary writing that speaks to and from a world whose "two cultures" are increasingly visible as continually interactive.

This linguistic interaction is central to other essays in this part of the volume. In an inquiry into the modality of voicing in Middle English, Katherine Zieman uses marginal Latin manuscript annotations to show medieval categories of poetic tropes and modes in Chaucer, especially that of the apostrophe, where the notion of Chaucer's "personal" voicing most fully tests the Latin apparatus. Yet as Zieman shows, the effects of such "personal" voicing remain elusive in modern critical frameworks as well. Extending the question of the resulting modality of such Latin-English translation, Katharine Breen argues that Anima in *Piers Plowman* stands as a kind of learning device cast in "sorry Latin," combining the resources of personification, language instruction, visual schemes of virtues and vices, and wider ethical systems to bring readers to synthesize Latinate and vernacular, secular domains into a literary mode at once stable and moveable, didactic and whimsical, which

mixes gender roles as readily as languages and schemes when “practical” purposes demand. This argument offers a way to show how medieval “faculty” psychology and gendered literary motifs could be framed within the terms of basic doctrinal imagery and text, which Breen shows Langland to be exploiting here, in ways that parallel the peculiar visual presentations of the texts in the *Speculum theologiae*. In turn, Ralph Hanna takes up in more formalist terms another standard “didactic” Latin work highly likely to have influenced *Piers Plowman* directly: the *Speculum vitae*, whose reassembling, Hanna shows, constitutes another central key to Langland’s intellectually “traditional” but ethically revolutionary reassessments.

The conclusions from such inquiries point toward an important variety of new methods as well as a range of new conclusions, some with rather different implications for further work. Whereas Breen sees the tools of basic Latin and doctrinal pedagogy as means to and instances of vital literary and intellectual production, Hanna argues that Langland approached the *Speculum Vitae* in a way that revived and reanimated an outworn ethical project by questioning its application to direct experience. Both essays show how didacticism served to produce a more surreally vibrant yet intellectually dense modality than at least some modern notions of “the literary” can accommodate. Finally, closing part 1, my essay takes up the relation between Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* and Petrarch’s Latin story of Griselda to ponder the strange pleasures of renunciation visible in both, a topic that Middleton opened over three decades ago.¹⁸ The history of emotion, as Jonathan Culler has observed, offers a particularly promising direction for “literary criticism for the twenty-first century.”¹⁹ Here too, however, medieval scholars have provided foundational studies, although those foundations are fragmentary and submerged. Revisiting some of those, and outlining a historical phase of transition in the understanding of “need” and deprivation, I suggest that a late-medieval “aesthetics of renunciation” is key to the idea of the literary and the impetus for aesthetics generally, as those developed differently in Italian and English contexts.

The volume’s second part turns to “the literary” outside the Latin sphere, here in the relations between English and other vernaculars, especially Italian and French, as these shaped medieval form and ideas of literary genre and literariness as such. This part, “Literarity in the Vernacular Sphere,” returns in a different way to the question Greenblatt asked concerning what literary his-

18. Anne Middleton, “The Clerk and His Tale: Some Literary Contexts,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 2 (1980): 121–50.

19. Culler, “Introduction: Critical Paradigms,” 912, referring to the essay in the same volume by Sianne Ngai, “Our Aesthetic Categories,” *PMLA* 125 (October 2010): 948–58.

tory is, and whether its relations to formal or to cultural contexts should take priority. That question has been recently broached anew by Steven Justice,²⁰ and in his essay here Justice instances that concern again by showing how Chaucer's response to Dante's geographic realism in the *Troilus* allows a teasing rhetoric of uncertainty about the details of "character" and thus about history itself, though still returning to a history that is distinctively literary. In a similar reappraisal, Frank Grady turns to the major "alternative" tradition of alliterative poetry to show how the uneasy combination of "tragedy" and hunting in that poetry is part of a larger collection of strategies for emphasizing how "form" can be imposed on contingent phenomena, a mode of apparent literary transcendence of history that is sustained and helps sustain the social relations of medieval seignorial culture.

As Middleton has repeatedly stressed, literary form is cultural meaning and power; and other essays in this second section on vernacular literature demonstrate and extend this proposition. Using Gower's French *Mirour de l'Omme*—representative of another key vernacular of medieval England—Maura Nolan shows that the historical and ethical formulations of "necessity" and "contingency," the concepts by means of which Gower routinely represents Fortune, also govern his poetic production in that poem and throughout his oeuvre. Patterson here revisits the question of what "tragedy" is in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* to argue for its origins in what Patterson shows is the Dantean mode, not the Boethian one, thus refuting the commonest assumption about Chaucer's poem and its genre: it is not tragedy in our sense but what we would call "epic," and therefore is a form of historical narrative whose sense of origins, beginnings, and causes are the central issues. Patterson's tracing of this genealogy opens up from a new perspective Chaucer's unsettling focus on the social world as a wide field of human agenda and choices rather than transcendental causes, and thus provides a key instance of how a particular literary form has defined literary criticism's fascination with the social implications of literature. Like Justice's essay, Patterson's essay shows how Chaucer creates literary history as a richly historical experience and from the inside out, in terms of narrative mode that defines the powers and limits of historical consciousness.

The volume's final essays extend other critical approaches to reassess the medieval literary, often directly based on the kinds of issues and strategies that Middleton established. D. Vance Smith discusses the silences in medieval literature concerning everyday economic life and the work of women,

20. Steven Justice, "Literary History," in *Chaucer: Contemporary Approaches*, ed. David Raybin and Susanna Fein (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 195–210.

in order to show—against a wide range of domestic and grammar school history—that *Piers Plowman* stresses the limits of literary decorum where it breaks into that silence. Smith's essay thus treats in new ways the *limits* of the literary, its boundaries at domestic intimacy; yet he links this back to Dame Study's uneasiness with the violations of the traditional venues of Latin learning that Langland's own poem embodied. Finally, David Lawton extends the concern with "form" into an approach to "voicing" in a major response to and extension of the central theme of Middleton's essay, "The Idea of Poetry in the Reign of Richard II": he shows how complex the nature of voicing is in Middle English poetry, and he folds Chaucer back into this complex field from which Middleton had excluded him. Lawton's essay shows in sum how substantial Middleton's critical innovation was by extending it in many further directions, finding in "voice" the body both of a text and of a reciter (or musician), and using Chaucer's invocations of Ovid's Orpheus as a key to these and other aspects of how voicing both seeks flight from any form and carries bodily and material weight wherever it goes.

Many other categories and subcategories besides the two simple divisions used in this book might be used to chart the medieval literary, and certainly many other critical trajectories beyond Middleton's work are in fact kept in view in this volume. Yet in tandem these basic categories, with her influential and prescient work threading among them, provide a fuller and more varied assessment of "the medieval literary" than has elsewhere appeared so directly. It is hoped that so framed, the topic may become a major resource as much as a problem within and beyond medieval studies: a means of adding to as well as challenging our strategies for literary understanding and appreciation of any kind.