Truth and Tales
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It is a familiar irony that the churl’s tale told by Chaucer’s Miller is a sparkling literary gem, exquisitely paced and pitched even as it is performed, we are told, by a working man too drunk to sit upright or speak clearly. It is theologically witty despite its teller’s and its main character’s disclaiming of interest in “Goddes pryvetee”; and it brilliantly parodies the Knight’s dolefully interminable exploration of the workings of “aventure” with the counterproposal that what we get, whether or not this seems fair to us, is the direct result of our habits and choices. The Miller has violated social decorum, as well as the tale-telling contract established in the General Prologue, defying the Host by insistently interposing himself after the Knight in place of the higher-ranking Monk; yet the tale’s conclusion reinforces social hierarchies as the whole town joins in mocking a carpenter’s simplicity and accepting the explanation of events agreed upon, seemingly miraculously, by all the clerks.¹

Familiar, again, is the way Chaucer complicates our understanding of the tale and its teller still further in the authorial apology for *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole that concludes the Miller’s Prologue, one of the most famous passages in his poetry:

What sholde I moore seyn, but this Millere
He nolde his wordes for no man forbere,

¹ Quotations of Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), with subsequent references by fragment and line number.
But tolde his cherles tale in his manere.
M’athynketh that I shal reherce it heere.
And therfore every gentil wight I preye,
For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
Or elles falsen som of my mateere.
And therfore, whoso list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.
The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe wel this.
So was the Reve eek and othere mo,
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.
Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame;
And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game. (I.3167–86)

Chaucer defends himself here against the imputation of evil intent on the
grounds of his obligation to truth, in this case defined as accurate representa-
tion (“I moot reherce”) of his “mateere.” Readers are of course entirely aware
that the oral performance purportedly rendered in writing before their eyes
is itself a fabrication. Even more than his implicit claim that his written text
represents speech (“I seye”), Chaucer’s directive that readers whom it does
not please to hear the tale should turn the page (3176–77) collapses supposed
boundaries between oral performance, written rendition, and their audiences.
He proleptically embraces his readers within the Miller’s Tale’s exposition of
just (or unjust) deserts by warning them to blame themselves, not him, if they
choose to read it. By protesting too much, he courts their skepticism that a
tale told by a “cherl” can be so readily dismissed out of hand (3182–84), and
similarly that his seeming afterthought, the opposition between “ernest” and
“game,” is as straightforward as he makes out (3186).

It is scarcely a new insight, then, that medieval learned and popular, oral
and textual, or high and low cultures might intermingle or combine rather
than remaining simply opposed; that this mixing might facilitate rather than
impede the transmission of ideas and beliefs; or that their purported truth
might be conveyed through entertaining stories as much as through instruc-
tional treatises. Indeed, it was scarcely a new insight even for Chaucer and

2. For the oppositions themselves, see Herbert Grundmann, “Litteratus, illiteratus: der
Wandel einer Bildungsnorm von Altertum zum Mittelalter,” Archiv für Kulturgeschichte 40
his contemporaries. However, appreciation for this complexity has gained new purchase in the last few years. Widespread critical interest in discovering circulation, mobility, and negotiation where a previous generation might have emphasized fixity, hierarchy, and the stability of truths perceived as absolute has impelled us to develop a greater range of skills in analyzing the media and discursive contexts through which truths are conveyed.1 We are no longer satisfied merely to demonstrate that things moved; that voices dissented from what had seemed univocal certainties. We now want to describe where and how and by what means truth moves: in what oral testimony, what publicly displayed symbols, what texts written by whom and circulated and copied in what formats and through what channels; what genres and kinds and mixtures of talk and writing. And we want to know what changes as truth moves—we no longer assume (even if this is sometimes the case) that movement and voices change nothing, inverting the established social order only temporarily or superficially.4 Indeed, Richard Firth Green has argued, through a series of brilliantly executed case studies, that the concept of “truth” itself underwent an uneasy yet fundamental transition in the later medieval period in England: from what he calls sense 2, where “truth” inheres in social bonds reinforced by formal promises, legal and otherwise, to sense 1, where “truth” is ratified by conformity to states of affairs in the world.5 In the period covered


5. Richard Firth Green, A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). The Middle English Dictionary (MED) devotes sections 1 through 8 of its definition of “treuthe” to sense 2, which ranges from personal loyalty to moral virtue to religious faith, and sections 9 through 13 to sense 1, ranging from reality to accuracy to veracity in speech to rectitude in testimony or judgment. The truths that a community agrees are self-evident (e.g., moral principles), or that they think can only be ratified by belief in things unseen (e.g., religious faith), may only be partly accounted for by these senses, but do fit roughly under sense 2.
by the chapters of this book, and arguably on into the present, these senses operate side by side, and often in tension.

Thus, these chapters are far from unique, amidst current scholarship, in their wish to complicate simple oppositions between learned and popular, written and oral, clergy and laity. And they are far from unusual in agreeing that the truths that persons and communities arrive upon are transactional rather than absolute, the product of discussion and debate. Where they converge, and become distinctive, is in their effort to unfurl the implications of a more complex model of interaction in ways that account for both the affective charge, the centripetal force, of truth claims in any instance, and Green’s insight into the tension at their basis. If truths move, if even the basis on which they are decided is unstable, then in what ways is a tale like the Miller’s, or for that matter like any of the tales recounted or analyzed in this volume, a vehicle for their negotiation?

That tales convey what their tellers and audiences regard as truth is something no literary scholar would deny, and nor would any historian, even if either scholar might be skeptical that the concept of “truth” furthers a particular analysis or uninterested in narrative as a mode of engagement with the past. Yet from its earliest recorded usages in the English language, “tale” has had a far broader and more variable definition than we might expect: it encompasses a dizzying array of material, oral, and written media and discursive modes for conveying information. A notched tally-stick whose import is as obvious to a peasant as to his lord, just as much as a handwritten account book employed in a literate gentry household, might provide a “tale” in the sense of a count, or tally, or that by which one calculates or reckons (MED, s.v. “tale,” def. 7f). The oral rendition of a romance after a group supper, just as much as a legal plea in court or a disputation conducted in a college hall,

6. In Old English: talu: 1. a tale, talk, story, account; 2. a talk, discussion, dispute; 3. a charge, claim; 4. an excuse, a defence; 5. as a law term, a case, an action; 6. a tale, list, series. Entry condensed to definitions only: derived from Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, s.v. “talu,” November 18, 2010, http://www.bosworthtoller.com/030197 (accessed July 25, 2013). In Middle English: tale (n.): 1. the oral or written relation of an event or a series of events purporting to be true, a personal narrative; 2. a set or formal narrative, oral or written, of events that occurred or are believed to have occurred in the past; a story which may be fictive but which illustrates moral truth; a story with a consciously invented plot; 3. the act of speaking; discourse, talk; also, language; 4. an assertion; also, an argument; a protest; an accusation; a complaint; 5. a conversation; a topic of conversation; a debate, disputation; 7. a numerical quantity; a frequency; a group of persons; a tally; also, that by which one calculates or reckons; 8. estimation of value; 9. blame; 10. reasoning, reckoning. Entry condensed and summarized, with some miscellaneous subentries removed: derived from Hans Kurath, Sherman Kuhn, et al., Electronic Middle English Dictionary, s.v. “tale,” April 24, 2013, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/ (accessed July 25, 2013). Henceforth cited as MED.
might compel its listeners’ attention (MED, s.v. “tale,” defs. 1a, 2a, 3, 4c, 5c). An expository description, just as much as a fictional narrative, might be circulated and recopied in handwritten or printed form among expected as well as unanticipated readers, and recited aloud or memorized as well as read silently (MED, s.v. “tale,” defs. 1, 2, 3d). The broadened sense of what individuals in a given culture might understand as a “tale” afforded by this historical perspective suggests that the medieval past still has much to contribute to our understanding of the present, even in what we think of as a far more interconnected and interactive world where digital media often (not invariably) ensure that information can be conveyed almost instantaneously. For what we can learn depends crucially, even now, on what we are willing to attend to, and on the extent to which we allow it to surprise us—not less, on our access to the media by which it is conveyed. The late-medieval understanding of “tale” we learn from its usage in Old and Middle English (as well as the related usages in Old Norse, Middle High German, Old French, Anglo-Norman, and other languages that medieval speakers of English used or encountered) pushes us to account for multidirectional interactions between media and social groups who are expert in their use, rather than exiguous communication between higher and lower spheres. Since “tale” in this new understanding encompasses discursive modes in which “truth” is very differently defined—contrast, for example, legal testimony with romance, romance with religious instruction—our broadened understanding also enables us to examine how these modes work together, or alone, to lay claim to truth, typically through the


8. In Anglo-Norman, and to a greater extent Middle English, Germanic and Romance semantic fields merge and overlap, whereas in Old French, “taile” derives from “taillier,” to cut or to decide or agree, and has a smaller semantic range, from the action of cutting, to a person’s height, to an imposed tax, to a mark on a tally-stick. See A. J. Greimas, Dictionnaire de l’ancien français (Paris: Larousse, 1979, 1992), s.v. “taillier”; The Anglo-Norman Dictionary, s.vv. “taille,” “tailler,” http://www.anglo-norman.net/ (accessed July 25, 2013). Cf. Middle English “tale,” defs. 7 and 8, as well as 9 and 10, in n. 6 above; but cf. also MED, s.v. “taille” (n.).
conformity of their content with observable phenomena (recall Green’s sense 1) or with the relationships between persons (his sense 2).

The hypermediation of our own lived experience in the present day is surely one reason why medievalists now attend more closely to the complex interplay between oral, written, performed, and material media in the cultures they study; between kinds of written record often considered distinct from one another such as the manuscript book, inscribed tablet, printed book, parchment roll, and handwritten quire; and between discursive modes as various yet finally inseparable as storytelling, historical account, dialogue, legislation, homiletics, lyric poetry, geographical or architectural description, public ritual, and performed song. But the case studies of “truth” conveyed through “tales” to be found in this volume also provide a new vantage point upon studies of culture and media in the present. They suggest that the interconnective web of communications through and between media and discursive modes that we all negotiate in daily life developed not from some previous unidirectional simplicity but from a communication network not unlike our own, if slower. And they show that careful reconstruction of how oral and written communication interact in the past can provide us with new models (even as present contexts in turn inform medievalists’ models) for how oral culture is remediated in, but also mediates, what is written, read, felt, and remembered. Written texts, for example, recount scenes of oral performance in ways that give us more than, or something different from, just the words that were performed; but equally, these same written texts might themselves be read aloud, and in that performance might mimic or shadow the performance they report.9

Equally, these chapters give new impetus to studies of orality and folktales in the medieval past. Some such studies have sought to isolate for analysis the remnants within written literature of an oral culture of tale-telling separable from the written word. This endeavor remains worthwhile, but it gives rise to a self-limiting inquiry that determinedly looks away from the written artifacts that are typically its basis.10 Similarly, some studies have attempted to reconstruct the oral culture surrounding material artifacts like tally-sticks or pilgrim badges in ways that isolate that oral culture as an alternative or predecessor to written culture.11 If we instead see these material artifacts as

10. Medieval Oral Literature, ed. Karl Reichl (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), is a multi-authored comprehensive survey of periods and genres that marvelously epitomizes what this field of inquiry can achieve—all contributors emphasize the oral, but certainly, not all look away from writing with the same determination.
11. On the tally-stick, and for the best reproduction of his chosen photograph, see M. T.
media that interact with other media—as in Hanawalt’s chapter in this volume, where the symbol stamped on a loaf of bread indicates its conformity with a standard established in written documents and guaranteed through close monitoring by members of a local community—then we are better able to attend to the interplay between media, the modes and truth-claims they deploy, and the social status of the speakers and writers of those media. Our analysis of material artifacts inscribed with writing is correspondingly enriched. Especially since we now often work with their digital images, it can be easy to forget that not only written charms worn around the neck and broadsides hidden up the sleeve, but handwritten and printed books, are not merely media but things. They were manufactured, passed from hand to hand, held and manipulated and read aloud; and situated in relationships between persons whose gender, social status, and capabilities bear crucially upon how they were circulated and used, in ways that we can now only partly recover.12

How the truth of a “tale” may be established or negotiated will vary widely, then, depending on local expectations about who may convey it, in what form, to what audiences, and through what media. The chapters in this volume present case studies that measure the scope of this range, focusing mainly though not exclusively on England circa 900–1500. The volume’s narrative arc begins, as it ends, with a comparative chapter that brings past and present into contact, urging readers to consider how a revised understanding of the medieval world as already skeptical of what might be imagined to be its stable certainties, already negotiating between media rather than progressing from oral to written to printed media in a smoothly civilizing process, can deepen our engagement with the uncertainties and multiplicities of the present. The chapters in between are ordered not chronologically, but in a sequence that furthers the conversations taking place between them. Chapters in part 2,

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12. As an entry to this way of thinking, see D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For an introduction to the material forms of medieval manuscripts, see the remarkably comprehensive survey provided by Barbara A. Shailor, *The Medieval Book: Illustrated from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).
“Repetition and Continuity: The Claims of History,” consider how retelling stories provides writers with a basis for truth-claims about historical continuity, even in the face of major cultural shifts such as the development of the Western church, the rise of the universities, and the Norman Conquest. Chapters in part 3, “Cultural Divides and Their Common Ground,” seek to explain the remarkable consensus visible in tales produced by disparate and perhaps conflicting social groups, even across oral, material, and written media, when it comes to matters of life or death such as salvation in the next life or subsistence in the present. Part 4, “New Media and the Literate Laity,” focuses on how the expanding literate public of the fifteenth century repurposes old and new media and genres in ways that suit its newly developing concerns.

The conversations within and among these three clusters of chapters began at a conference in honor of Richard Firth Green that invited responses to his consistently pathbreaking contributions to the study of medieval popular culture over the past thirty years. It is fitting, then, that Green opens the discussion in the volume’s first chapter, which we have given its own part title: “The Truth of Tales 1.” His “‘The Vanishing Leper’ and ‘The Murmuring Monk’: Two Medieval Urban Legends” opens with a medieval “friend of a friend” story updated into a modern regional oral vernacular that many readers will recognize immediately (especially if they hail from southern Ontario or northern Ohio), even if they are not accustomed to encountering it in written form. Green’s rendition of this medieval tale illustrates the folkloric texture of medieval sermon exempla, which often, like contemporary urban legends, ground their veracity in a claim to personal experience. Against those who would view them as embedded within learned written culture, he suggests that like modern urban legends, these exempla passed around quickly in widely varying forms because Dominican friars recounted them to each other orally, as well as incorporating them within spoken sermons. Short stories with an overt moral theme, exempla were often compiled together in written collections, as well as deployed within written sermons: Green demonstrates the pervasive interplay between written and oral cultures evident in their circulation, recording, and performance. He suggests that like contemporary urban legends, exempla that claim a personal connection with the story were deployed skeptically, rather than always credulously or merely moralistically, as a means of engaging with and perhaps modifying public opinion. They promote not merely top-down instruction but critical evaluation of just the kinds we are familiar with in oral storytelling in the present.

Green’s chapter persuasively demonstrates that not only oral, popular narratives but tales embedded within learned writings, in vernacular languages and Latin both, bolster their veracity through claims of a personal connec-
tion to the story being told: the “truth” ratified by social bonds rather than external states of affairs that we encountered in his “truth” in sense 2 (see n. 6). The chapters that follow share his conviction that superficially very different kinds of storytelling, some of which do not present themselves as strictly factual and which may even be wildly fanciful, transact truth through claims anchored in the person, and use those claims to make connections with other persons. Indeed, the persons themselves are often fictive, as we saw with Chaucer’s Miller: they allow a writer or performer to “speak in the person of” another (as medieval literary theory would have it) or to present opposing positions in dialogue. In suggesting the complementary force of claims anchored in the person, these chapters provide a new perspective on the past thirty years of emphasis on “authority” and “authorship” based in conformity to learned tradition. Vernacular writings may draw on the authorizing force of academic prologues in the Latin tradition. But stories of any kind insistently solicit personal connections from tellers and audience alike, even before they begin, and certainly as they go on—connections that take considerable energy to resist.

Certainly Chaucer cannot resist the tale of Dido, or so he would have us believe. Thomas Hahn launches the volume’s second part, “Repetition and Continuity: The Claims of History,” by providing a newly broadened context for Chaucer’s obsession with Dido. In “Don’t Cry for Me, Augustinus: Dido and the Dangers of Empathy,” Hahn suggests that the repeated preoccupation with the story of Dido indulged in by Chaucer’s own narrative personae, who often suspend their own stories in order to dwell on hers, obliquely demonstrates that reveling in feeling and empathizing with female suffering are activities suitable not only to boys naively reading the classics and writing compositions on them, nor only to religious meditation for that matter, but also to learned literary appreciation. Chaucer presents us with an adult narrator whose indulgence in feeling may seem puerile, yet who seems in affirming these feelings andcourting our empathy with them to justify them as a response to narrative and a form of engagement with the past.

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The titular character in *Piers Plowman*, too, harks back to the past, although for rather different reasons. In “The New Plow and the Old: Law, Orality, and the Figure of Piers the Plowman in B 19,” Stephen Yeager demonstrates that far from proposing a new organization of society (as critics have sometimes suggested), the political order Piers establishes in the poem’s penultimate passus returns to past models by imitating the rhetoric of Anglo-Saxon legal documents. Piers Plowman is not only a homilist deploying the plowshare of the tongue, as critics have argued, but a man of law, closely familiar with the moral force of claims to land that purportedly uphold the country’s good old laws. Pre-Conquest legal documents fuse together legal and homiletic discourse to lend moral gravity to their claims. The versions of these documents that were recopied and indeed forged after the Conquest in order to legitimate legal claims on the basis of continuity with Anglo-Saxon law heighten this homiletic aspect, in contrast with the discursive style of contemporary Anglo-Norman law, in order to authenticate their claims to antiquity. And claims to retain or reinstate traditional law retained their allure up through Chaucer and Langland’s time and beyond.

While written artifacts can certainly demonstrate to us that their writers and readers found claims to continuity attractive, M. J. Toswell suggests in “The Exegesis of Tears in Lambeth Homily 17” that they often cannot provide unambiguous evidence of whether there really was continuity between the learned cultures of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman England, and if so of what kinds. The overlapping homily collections in a Lambeth Palace and a Trinity College Cambridge manuscript she discusses each contain regional or reworked Anglo-Saxon materials alongside new translations into Middle English: she shows that one tale within a sermon found in different forms in the two compilations is closely aware of recent teaching in Paris. Yet any interpretation of continuity or rupture in analyzing these contents must hinge on claims about the relationship between these written texts and the oral preaching performances they may be said to have prompted, recorded for repetition, or commemorated. These homily collections are artifacts of an interplay between oral and written culture in twelfth-century England that critics are laboring to reconstruct; thus the evidence they provide points both ways, as their recent critical history helps to demonstrate.

In repeating Green’s gesture by beginning with a “tale” grounded in personal connection, this time King Arthur’s description to Howel of a nearby four-cornered lake and its four kinds of fish that do not mix, Fiona Somerset shows in “Mingling with the English in Laȝamon’s Brut” how Arthur, and indeed Laȝamon himself, relies on his readers’ understanding of the natural order and how animals behave within it in order to articulate norms for
political conduct. The reiteration of these norms through repeated appeals to the truth of nature allows Laȝamon to assert continuity across the course of his vast narrative of the history of the British kings from Brut to Cadwalader, even amidst sometimes catastrophic historical change. As he narrates the migrations and invasions and regime changes that bring the British to the height of their power then to fall and exile in anticipation of a future return, Laȝamon shows that the people and languages of his island have been mixed up with one another since the beginning, just as they are now, amidst however much loss and destruction. What distinguishes kings and military leaders is their willingness to accept their island’s multiple ethnicities and origins.

Chapters in the volume’s second cluster turn from reiterations of historical continuity in the face of change and loss, to the surprising convergence between the disparate or even conflicting interests and concern of persons of differing class, status, and education forged by fears over survival or salvation. The dialogue and illustrative tale within *Pearl*, the focus of Alastair Minnis’s chapter “Unquiet Graves: *Pearl* and the Hope of Reunion,” is skeptical (unlike Laȝamon) that natural human feeling is a reliable guide to proper conduct, finding excess not in the behavior of animals but in the loving bonds between family members that many yearned, then as now, might be continued or renewed in the afterlife. In *Pearl*, significantly, it is a child who rejects the comforting notion found in some popular, vernacular writings that families will dwell together in heaven as they did on earth. She is a child transformed almost beyond recognition by her salvation: no longer uneducated or prone to indulge natural but childish feelings, she can now explain to her father what contemporary learned Latin writings would tell him: that in heaven he will be beyond all that. *Pearl* overturns expected hierarchies of status and of learning by presenting a little girl who is more wise than a grown man, and who explains to him the error of his ways in English rather than in Latin. Yet the poem manages not to disrupt these hierarchies, for its little girl, no longer really quite a little girl, no longer speaks for the lived experience of those on earth. That is the Dreamer’s role. His emotional responses establish their own validity by evoking fellow feeling in readers, even those who know he has his theology wrong or take his recounted vision with a grain of salt. Thus *Pearl* does not labor to deny our sense of what feelings are natural and indeed appropriate among loved ones—only of whether we can really retain them after death.

Michael Johnston’s “Mercantile Gentility in Cambridge, University Library MS Ff.2.38” similarly treats tales in which fears about death and salvation put extraordinary pressure on relationships both within and beyond the family, impelling the participants to reconsider the conventional expec-
tations attached to specific social statuses. In Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale the question is what kind of person can be most nobly generous in the face of a promise made to them that must occasion death or dishonor for another, and it remains pointedly unresolved. In the less well-known “Good Matter of the Merchant and His Son” in contrast, the Franklin figure is a poor businessman, much disliked for his rapaciousness, who appears to his son after death in a series of visions pleading for help in discharging his debts so that he may leave Purgatory. The nobly generous figure is this time a Merchant, who rewards the son’s loyalty in repaying his father’s debts even to the point of destitution with a generous restoration to his father’s full estate—and a new family, for the Merchant also bestows on him his daughter’s hand in marriage. While the tale itself seems certain that only merchants and not franklins are capable of noble generosity, however, the sharp demarcation between tradesmen and landowners that it creates is undone by its resolution and framing: it turns out that the Merchant is a landowner as well as a tradesman, for he gives his new son-in-law his lands as well as his daughter, and the tale addresses the readers of its urban-mercantile-owned manuscript flatteringly as “gentylmen.” Conventions are more durable than we might expect, even amidst rapid social change.

Beast fables that stage dialogues between competing kinds of creatures, rather than explicitly between persons with different social roles, are a more covert way to reconsider social status and hierarchy than we saw in Minnis’s or Johnston’s tales. Yet the animals in these fables are more than just humans in disguise, as Lisa J. Kiser persuasively argues in “Resident Aliens: The Literary Ecology of Medieval Mice.” The truth that underlies the beast fables she examines is a folk knowledge that relies on a common understanding of the workings of the natural world—and a common dislike of that competitor for the human food supply, the humble mouse. Fables may be understood to reinforce a conservative social agenda in that they suggest that people of certain statuses, like animals of particular kinds, should remain in the places where they naturally belong. Yet, on the other hand, these narratives’ preference for order over disorder also voice a shared fear over depletion of the food supply that promotes the common good more strongly than the status quo: a dead mouse is even better than a mouse that stays in its place. The fables’ disapproval of theft is censorious of social statuses especially associated with deceit and sharp practices; among them the mendicant orders, and the mercantile classes that Johnston’s “Good Matter” was so eager to defend. Kiser’s subtle reading of social satire locates its viewpoint in a common good all can agree upon, rather than in the pursuit of elite or class-specific interests. Yet she also illustrates how a human-shaped natural order is hostile, even violent,
toward whatever beast (or man) might be characterized as stepping outside its bounds—perhaps unsurprisingly, since human survival may depend on it.

The community concerned about possible disruptions that Barbara A. Hanawalt examines, in “Toward the Common Good: Punishing Fraud among the Victualers of Medieval London,” brings together a broader range of classes, through all the media at their disposal, in the face of the shared threat posed by deficiencies in the supply of nourishing food. She shows the interplay between ritual, material, documentary, oral, and literary aspects of public culture as they are deployed together to oppose what are presented as moral, as well as legal, violations. Both the expert assessment of compliance with regulations or culpability for breaking them, and public engagement with the material and ritual symbols meant to demonstrate what goods can be trusted, show crown and city, royal law and folk law, the people and their rulers, working together to ensure the common good of an urban community by enforcing conformity to “truth” in both senses.

Novelty and experiment with new genres and media characterize the work of an expanding literate public in the fifteenth century. Chapters in the volume’s third cluster examine case studies of this sort of experimentation, attentive to how their writers and compilers graft new forms onto old, and old onto new, as they remain invested in demonstrating their continuities with the past. Nicholas Watson suggests in “The Ignorance of the Laity: Twelve Tracts on Bible Translation” that while in earlier centuries it had been possible to categorize the laity as ignorant almost by definition, despite the inconvenient presence of a learned elite among them, this was a working model of the relationship between laity and clergy that was no longer functional by the fifteenth century in England. By this point, indeed, many laypersons were literate in Latin as well as the vernacular. Learning took many more forms, some accessible to audiences beyond the elite. And providing spiritual instruction to laymen had come to seem potentially threatening, rather than an unqualified good. The Lay Folks’ Catechism for example provides a brief catechetical survey, largely in the form of lists of the seven deadly sins, works of mercy, virtues, the Ten Commandments, and so forth—yet its prologue worries that rote learning, as opposed to informed knowledge, is not an adequate means to the fundamental truths necessary for salvation. The vast Wycliffite Bible translation of the whole of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament presents a far greater challenge to understanding, yet seems confident in its prologue of its accessibility to lay readers—even though the instruction in biblical interpretation the prologue provides begins at a far higher level of understanding than the focus of the Lay Folks’ Catechism’s worries. Watson centers his analysis on Cambridge, University Library MS II.6.26, whose twelve tracts on
biblical translation and redacted translation of Honorius Augustodunensis’s *Elucidarium* attempt varying characterizations of lay learning rather than taking a single position on its desirability—surely in part because they think differently about what materials in what media the laity can comprehend.

The Bolton Book of Hours provides direct evidence of broadened capabilities in religious literacy among the laity, as Robyn Malo demonstrates in “York Merchants at Prayer: The Confessional Formula of the Bolton Hours.” For it presents evidence of a layperson who is a maker, rather than however sophisticated a user, of the kinds of instruction that Watson is concerned with. Crammed into the first and last folios of this primer we find a short devotional work that was written by a member of the lay mercantile class rather than a cleric—perhaps, indeed, the writer was a female owner of this manuscript. The text is a form of confession: it aids readers in self-knowledge and preparation for confession by providing a kind of script listing the sins and commandments that rehearses how one might sin in each of them. Malo focuses on the text’s highly unusual presentation of the commandments, suggesting that rather than giving a formulaic, universally applicable account of sin, as texts of this kind are sometimes said to do, this form of confession instead tailors its recommendations to the mercantile community of its anticipated readers, focusing especially on kinds of misdeed that disrupt social bonds—this is “truth” very much in Green’s sense 2, whereas sense 1 might expect conformity to the standard list of commandments found in the decalogue and to a less idiosyncratic exposition of them.

Kathleen E. Kennedy’s “A London Legal Miscellany, Popular Law, and Medieval Print Culture” reveals that law was another field of specialized learning in which the urban laity were becoming increasingly expert. What she calls “Arnold’s Book,” a miscellaneous compilation, is typical of this kind of late-medieval household manuscript in that its highly various contents, from recipes to poems to legal statutes, reflect the interests of its owner, the haberdasher Thomas Arnold, without concern for consistency of topic or genre. Yet Arnold’s Book has the distinction that it was the one such miscellany to make its way into print. Partly on the basis of which of the contents of Arnold’s Book were extracted for printing by later publishers, Kennedy argues that it was the legal texts within the miscellany, rather than the literary ones, that led to its printing. The perceived market for these selections provides evidence that legal writings were broadly popular, and not just among literate audiences. The contents of Arnold’s Book show local communities participating in and engaging with the written word on their own terms, deploying legal discourse in interplay with other ritual and oral and popular forms of “tale.”
Whereas the impact on lay literacy of the laity’s greater involvement in manuscript production and print culture has been much studied and much debated, Michael Van Dussen draws attention to a late-medieval medium widely available in public places, but whose influence on the lived experience of an expanding literate public has mostly been overlooked. In “Tourists and Tabulae in Late-Medieval England” he examines the tabula, a written tablet displayed publicly at a particular place on which a description of the setting or an account of what happened or what is commemorated was displayed. The tabula was a medium frequently consulted by those writing personal accounts situated in a specific locale (whether public building, landscape, monument, or what have you) in the later Middle Ages and beyond, but often unmentioned as they copied its contents into their own narrative; while most tabulae are no longer extant, their contents can be traced in part by discovering precise textual repetitions in ostensibly personal accounts of public places. In surveying the kinds of “tale” that tabulae might present, from architectural description to commemorative poetry to narrative chronology, Van Dussen highlights how these artifacts interacted with other media ranging from speech to memory to the written travel narratives into which they might be seamlessly incorporated.

In “Oral Performance and the Force of the Law: Taillefer at Hastings and Antgulilibix in Smithers,” the volume’s final part, “The Truth of Tales 2,” Andrew Taylor calls on us to reconsider what truth-value we may assign to different media and the tales they convey. He returns our attention once more, as the volume concludes, to what the present might learn from the past, as much as what the study of the past might learn from the present. And he brings together what previous chapters have observed about how tales told over and over are connected to persons to establish their truth, how tales engage readers’ or listeners’ emotions, and how tales both rely on and shape their readers’ or listeners’ sense of the natural order of things. His focus is the performance of two narrative songs, one in 1987 and one in 1066, both deployed (one as testimony in court, one in joining battle) in pursuit of claims to land. Yet his primary concern is the various mediated representations of these performances. He does not include the words of either song—in the first case out of respect to the wishes of the Gitxsan and the Wet’suwet’en people, who have resisted the redaction of their oral culture into written form; in the second case because the words Taillefer sang of Roland are not recorded. But even the words, he reminds us, would not convey the impact of the immediate occasion: we have a responsibility to the past, he insists, just as much as to oral forms of legitimation that persist within the written legal culture of the present, to take oral performance seriously rather than
treat it reductively or dismiss its emotive force. Taylor examines how narrative accounts of the contexts of each performance make its emotional impact pivotal to historical change, and draws attention to the hypermediation of the 1987 performance, which has been represented not only in a variety of narratives but in documentary film, musical recording, political cartoons, trial transcripts, and academic books.

Taylor expresses as an ethical imperative a methodological issue that emerges in one form or another in all the chapters in this book: that even as we attend to the truth conveyed by medieval tales, we must attend also to the material and mediated forms in which the past is preserved and transmuted into the present—and to our biases toward media and discourses we have been trained to consider more readily verifiable. We cannot hear Taillefer sing, nor know the words he sung; and while we can delve into the transcripts of the 1987 trial (if they have them right) to discover the words Antgulilibix sang, we can understand what it was like to hear them only through the tales, in media and discursive modes ranging from the ruling of the Supreme Court of Canada in 1997 to a contemporary political cartoon by Don Monet, in which her singing has been asked to attest to other transactional truths. Yet, as this example illustrates, no less than this volume as a whole, our work as literary and cultural historians is immeasurably enriched if we task our imaginations with this effort of reconstruction, laboring to recover something like the full complexity of how persons and communities use tales to negotiate their relationships with one another and with the world, rather than focusing mainly or exclusively on their written relations.