



BOOK REVIEW

Daniel Donoghue, James Simpson, Nicholas Watson, and Anna Wilson, eds. *The Practice and Politics of Reading, 650–1500*

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This volume grew out of the conference “Reading Then, Reading Now” held at Harvard University on April 18–20, 2019. To create a coherent book, the editors explain, the scope of the project was redefined to the more specific topic of the practices and politics of pre-modern reading in Britain. However, the far-reaching Introduction conveys something of the grand ambition of the original enterprise. Particularly striking is its identification of challenges brought by “the ubiquity of digital reading,” which, it claims, “is changing our habits of thought and feeling and cultural attitudes at individual and societal levels” (2). The “normative literacy” that nowadays we take for granted, and in theory is a mark of progress (according to the grand narrative of increased literacy being a social good), has—the editors claim—its dark side, in a time of “both institutional surveillance and social media truth-fabrication” (3). W. B. Yeats is purposefully misquoted: “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate mendacity.” “Many of us have discovered that protocols of critical reading, nurtured so diligently, or so we thought, throughout entire educational systems, are fragile and defenseless”, the editors declare. “Apparently we must learn to read and to consider the personal, social, political, and even planetary ‘implications of literacy,’ all over again” (3). Indeed we must.

What insights can medievalists offer? For a start, the shared ground “between manuscript-reading and web-reading cultures” has placed them “at the forefront of the creation of the digital humanities” (3). Second, “Scholars of premodern reading are in a position to theorize the turn towards literary modes of adaptation, allusion, and retelling in digital literatures” (3). And third, one age of anxiety knows another: “both the heady cultural optimism that greeted the emergence of the internet and the trepidation that has increasingly qualified it themselves have equivalents in many moments across the medieval centuries” (4). Medievalists are well-placed to appreciate comparable crises today.

But, while these three factors certainly aid appreciation of the current situation, in themselves they cannot counter it. That may be achieved (one may venture to claim) through the modeling of balanced rational inquiry and analysis that should routinely take place in the classroom and in academic research. Kathryn Mogk Wagner’s statement cannot be bettered: “By teaching readers how to use texts as sources of healing, models for ethical formation, and means of social action, they help bring about the conditions under which texts actually have such powers” (156). As teachers, “we may work to establish and reestablish ties—to make texts useful for human needs and longings, to render readers malleable to texts’ formative influence, to link by link construct a coherent cultural world. It is only through this

labor of reading, medieval theorists suggest, that texts can make a difference” (158). Those medieval theorists have a lot to say to us.

The twelve essays collected here are divided into two sections, “Practices of Reading” and “Politics of Reading,” which, the editors admit, are not exclusive categories, and indeed are quite porous. The first section begins with contributions from Daniel Donoghue, who brings contemporary eye-movement studies to bear on medieval manuscript culture, and Emily V. Thornbury, who with reference to the Old English *Exodus* demonstrates how ornament can perform a structurally essential role in the formation and impact of verse. Erica Weaver addresses the interpretive problems that accounts of marvels presented to monkish readers, who had to separate out the reliable from the doubtful, truth from fiction; Catherine Sanok explains how devotional texts related to the “veronica” relic promoted a direct form of religious engagement and self-reflection on the reader’s part; and Amy Appleford shows how two Middle English derivatives of the Office of the Dead enabled their vernacular readers to speak in the voice of Job, thereby achieving a denaturalized ascetic identity. Kathryn Mogk Wagner ends this first section with an examination of how the Pater Noster is treated in several literary contexts, providing an impressive account of how, in his *Purgatorio*, Dante “represents the Lord’s Prayer as a dynamic process of performance” (149).

The second section features Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe on the contrasting ideologies of reading held by King Alfred and Ælfric, Samantha Katz Seal on the stereotypical Jew as a bad “literalist” reader, and Andrew Kraebel on how the “Paues compilation” (so called after its editor) questions the distinction usually made between Middle English biblical translations and devotional texts. Andrew James Johnston explicates how, in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, the Maid of Astolat’s elaborate plan to have her deathbed letter read aloud in public does not work out. Then Kathleen Tonry describes how a fishing treatise published by Wynkyn de Worde recommends angling as the best possible sport for “gentlemen,” here addressing merchants and the landed gentry, readers with ample wealth and leisure time, who need not fear moral censure for idleness.

Michelle De Groot ends the collection by extending the concept of “communal reading” to encompass the reception of political pageantry, comparing the 1392 pageant that welcomed Richard II to London with the 2018 state funeral of US senator John McCain. The medievalizing rhetoric of a “city on a hill,” a partially secularized New Jerusalem, featured in Joseph Lieberman’s oration. De Groot describes the entire occasion (which McCain himself had organized) as an “attempt to encourage a politically fractured community to save itself by reading together” (270). Donald Trump was not invited. To state the painfully obvious, since then the fractures have got a lot worse, and the possibility of reading together is much more remote.

Medievalist scholarship rarely, if ever, gets better than this. The sheer excellence of the research itself and the cogency of the writing, together with the formidable apparatus of scholarly citation and bibliography, stand in quiet resistance to the truth-invention and unchecked circulation of alternative facts that unrelentingly assault contemporary reading and interpretive practices.