

A C SPEARING. **Medieval Autographies: The “I” of the Text.** Pp. viii + 348 (The Conway Lectures in Medieval Studies). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. Paper, £27.50

In this book, A. C. Spearing takes up the argument he first set out in *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics*, which holds that medieval writing in the first person does not presuppose an individuated speaker or narrator in the way that modern readers might tend to assume. Spearing argues that, for the most part, medieval texts encode subjectivity rather than representing it. That is, they use deictic words like ‘I’ and ‘you’, ‘this’ and ‘that’ to convey the sense of subjective experience, but they do so without positing a fictional speaker as the locus of that experience. The result is to create ‘an effect of experience without an experiencing subject’ (p.21). Spearing presses this claim in some engaging readings of ‘extended, non-lyrical, fictional writings in and of the first person’ from late medieval England (p.1), including *Wynnere and Wastoure*, the ‘Wife of Bath’s Prologue’, the prologue to Hoccleve’s *Regement of Princes* and the ‘Complaint’ and ‘Dialogue’ that begin his *Series*, and the prologues and interludes in Osbern Bokenham’s *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*. He proposes that we might group these texts together as part of a ‘supergenre’ of first person writing, characterised by its use of subjective effects, as well as by its improvisatory qualities and its self-conscious interest in the conditions of textuality, and he calls this supergenre ‘autography’.

Spearing notes that autography flourished in the late fourteenth century, after a long period when there was little or no extended, first person writing in English. He gives *Wynnere and Wastoure* (c.1352) as his earliest post-conquest example, although

the late twelfth century *Poema Morale* might also meet the criteria for inclusion. Middle English autography finds its most important precedent in the French *dit*, a tradition of writing in the first person that combines ‘the *effect* of spoken performance’ with self-consciousness about its own writtenness (p.55). Its fullest expressions appear in prologues, which are Spearing’s main concern in this book, and in dream poems.

Spearing describes the appeal of autography in terms of ‘the pleasure to be gained from shared interiority’ (p.102), where interiority is a literary effect produced by the use of deixis and need not imply an individuated narrator. Autography also allowed poets to compose in a way that was unpredictable, experimental and open-ended, rather than mapping out the whole structure of their work before they began to write. This way of writing afforded freedoms that medieval theories of poetry might seem to proscribe. (Geoffrey of Vinsauf, for example, says that poets, like builders, should have the design of their whole project in mind before they begin work, an analogy that Chaucer, Hoccleve and Bokenham were all familiar with, and to which Spearing returns throughout the book.) In some of the book’s most rewarding analysis, Spearing argues that the improvisatory character of these texts extends to their use of subjective effects. As part of chapter 2, for example, he reads the ‘Reeve’s Prologue’ not as a dramatic monologue but rather as an improvisation on moral themes and poetic tropes, interspersed with local effects of direct speech and subjective experience. In chapter 7, he suggests that Bokenham uses deixis in the *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* to involve the unfolding form of his text with ‘the temporality and unpredictability of human experience’ (p.219).

Spearing offers a wide-ranging critique of what he refers to as ‘modern criticism’ and of the assumptions about speakers and narrators that underpin it. He is

particularly critical of readings that identify an unreliable narrator in medieval texts and which argue that the text's real meaning is 'different from that expressed by the speaker' (p.4). Spearing finds such readings to be suspiciously anachronistic, noting that the text's 'intended meaning ... almost invariably turns out to be one that appeals to the taste of the twentieth- or twenty-first century academic interpreter' (p.4). He also argues that modern critics are predisposed to look for discursive coherence in medieval texts, in a way that leads us to ignore 'the poet's freedom of invention and improvisation' (p.113). These criticisms are related: the modern assumption that first person texts emerge from the consciousness of a particular speaker helps to reinforce the expectation that they will be coherent. Spearing's critique of contemporary critical practice is engaging and provocative, but it perhaps overstates the extent to which 'modern criticism' presents medieval narrators, and medieval selfhood, as coherent and unified. Scholarship on *Piers Plowman*, for example, often describes the narrating 'I' as a subject formed in relation to social and textual discourses, a subject who is internally divided or conflicted or constituted by a sense of lack. (In *Textual Subjectivity*, Spearing himself briefly discusses David Lawton's 1987 article on 'The Subject of *Piers Plowman*', with its influential argument that the poem's narrator is an 'open persona', shaped in relation to 'multiple and contradictory discourses of power'.) Spearing's own readings, particularly of Hoccleve, sometimes seem to suggest a narrating persona who is constituted in this way, rather than the absence of such a persona.

Having challenged the idea that medieval texts have individuated narrators, Spearing sometimes seems inclined to reinstate the historical author as an alternative. Discussing Chaucer's prologues, for example, Spearing says that 'where the "I" is identified with the writer of the poem, there is no reason to think that Chaucer is

impersonating someone else, a fictional being completely different from himself' (p.39). Later he says that since the 'I' of Hoccleve's *Series* is named 'Hoccleve' and has much in common with what we know or can infer about the historical Hoccleve, 'it seems justifiable to refer to the "I" simply as "Hoccleve"' (p.173). Spearing is careful to maintain a theoretical distinction between the author and the textual first person ('Chaucer' and 'Hoccleve' are preferable to 'the narrator' in these examples, but not unproblematic), and notes the risks that come from eliding the two ('there may be a danger of reading Hoccleve as a whole self back into a text in which he appears as a fragmented subject' (p.174)). Yet if, in some of Spearing's readings, the experience of the historical author is one element among many that might be included in the improvised development of an autobiography, in others the author comes close to replacing the narrator as the 'experiencing subject', making the text seem once again stable and coherent.

Medieval Autographies is a thought-provoking, elegantly written book that challenges us to think about subjectivity as a literary effect available for 'a [wide] variety of expressive purposes', rather than as the expression of a particular narrator's point of view (p.10). It also makes a compelling case for reading medieval texts as 'freely-composed, loose-jointed structures' (p.257). Spearing offers an interpretative framework that might fruitfully be applied to many more texts than his book considers, and which will stimulate some worthwhile reflection on what we choose to value in them.

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