

Uncertain Knowledge: Scepticism, Relativism, and Doubt in the Middle Ages.
Dallas G. Denery II, Kantik Ghosh, and Nicolette Zeeman, eds.
Disputatio 14. Turnhout: Brepols, 2014. viii + 346 pp. €90.

This collection of fourteen essays, arising from a conference held at Cambridge in 2011, pushes against the inherited notion of the Middle Ages as an age of faith. It does this, however, not primarily in regard to religious belief, but in the realm of intellectual

history. A recurrent target is the inherited historiographical view that holds that it is only in the early modern period that Western thought came to recognize uncertainty, positionality, and hence relativism and subjectivity, all of which, it is thought, had wider implications for politics, society, and the subject. Not so, as all the contributors here demonstrate: medieval minds were also aware of, and to some degree able to grapple with, ambiguity, uncertainty, and different notions of knowledge, and were able to deploy different kinds of skepticism and accept that one could legitimately doubt. Dallas Denery demonstrates this most excellently in his essay on the premodern court, showing that John of Salisbury, writing in the twelfth century, “completes the intellectual journey from uncertainty to probability to deception that so many early modern thinkers would later make.”

Elsewhere in the collection, the focus is more resolutely intellectual and less political. Thus Dominik Perler discusses fourteenth-century debates on sensory illusions, focusing on the thought of Walter Chatton and William Ockham; and Christophe Grellard unpacks John Buridan’s use of the figure of the misbelieving little old lady (*vetulae*) — a common trope in a variety of medieval discourses — to explicate the complexity of belief as a form of cognition. Rita Copeland examines different strands in the intellectual reception of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, noting that Giles of Rome’s attempt to grapple with it as an (unstable) element in logic was largely ignored by other medieval authors in favor of treating it as pertaining to ethics and political theory. Other essays use more-literary sources for similar projects: Karen Sullivan looks at the figure of Merlin in histories and romance, and Nicolette Zeeman, Mishtooni Bose, and Hester Gelber consider how a number of late Middle English texts deal with implicit or explicit issues of epistemology.

These are important contributions to intellectual history, collectively reminding early modernists that the claims of Renaissance humanists and others of having moved far beyond a simplistic medieval mind-set were just that — claims, rather than objective reality. The collection is fairly coherent for a set of conference proceedings (only one essay — Sarah Kay’s very interesting piece on a Derridean analysis of human-animal overlap — sits entirely outside the stated aims of the book), though the collective focus is split in a slightly odd fashion between late medieval English and northern French vernacular works and thirteenth-/early fourteenth-century Latin treatises. These are, it is true, connected in the currents of medieval intellectual culture, but it is perhaps rather odd that nothing from Italy is included, given its importance to the politico-intellectual debate in these areas, and odd also how rarely the University of Paris and quodlibetic questions come up as a key context within which difficult questions might arise. It should be emphasized just how much the focus is on pure intellectual history. This has several implications: a very high level of intellectual insight to the precise nature of the medieval arguments, and the connections made between different thinkers; but also an almost total lack of interest in the world beyond the highest intellect (Buridan’s *vetulae* notwithstanding) or the contexts within which those intellects were formed or exercised. It also means that at points in particular essays one might be misled into characterizing something like “medieval thought” as an abstract gestalt, whereas — as with Copeland’s

distinction between rhetoric in regard to logic and rhetoric in regard to politics — one is more clearly presented, reading across the essays, with a variety of discourses, and a number of different “mind-sets” (if that term has any utility). Only in Kantik Ghosh’s excellent piece on academic skepticism and heresy, which places a particular and particularly complex confrontation in early fifteenth-century England in the wider frame of late medieval politics (ecclesial and secular), are we asked to engage with the messy world beyond the intellectual page.

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