

A. C. Spearing. *Medieval Autographies: The "I" of the Text*.

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Once in a while there arrives a book such as A. C. Spearing's *Medieval Autographies: The 'I' of the Text* that is ambitious enough in scope to open important new ways of reading medieval texts, as well as (potentially) some from later periods. In his book, Spearing offers a bold and stimulating thesis about the construction of subjectivity (the "I" in the text) and applies it to a number of late medieval writings, including the French *dits*, *Wynnere and Wastoure*, several works by Chaucer (*The Canterbury Tales* prologues, "The Wife of Bath's Tale," *The Book of the Duchess*, *Troilus and Criseyde*), Hoccleve's *Series*, and Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, suggesting at the end that his approach may also bear fruit in reading *Piers Ploughman* and the poetry of Skelton.

Throughout, Spearing uses the word *autography*. He did not coin it, but is the first to use it in quite this way when discussing medieval literature. He uses the term to refer to extended nonlyrical writings in the first person in which an "I" is presented as a "written I" or "languaged self," rather than an account of an experiencing human. The aim is to evoke "proximality and experientiality." He is at pains to distinguish it from the more familiar *autobiography*, and these two terms are in dialogue throughout the book. Sometimes, as with Hoccleve's *Series*, Spearing is willing to grant that the autography is evolving into autobiography, or rather "autobiographical fiction" or "pseudo-autobiography." Throughout, there is a strong emphasis on the textuality and constructed nature of the "I" in these writings, moving away from any sense that this "I" may present the coherent independent self either of author or of narrator.

At the heart of the argument is a discussion of French *dits*, nonlyrical poems in the first person intended to be said rather than sung and often with allegorical or dream content. Spearing's approach to the "I" in the *dit* is used as an intellectual foundation for what follows, with other texts considered for their "*dit*-like" qualities, and he makes good use of modern narrative theory in this chapter. There follows a discussion of the *dit*'s probable influences on Chaucer and the possibilities it offered for freedom of composition. Spearing argues convincingly for Chaucer's "impatience with preconceived designs and . . . delight in the riskiness of free composition" (122). Sometimes, perhaps, the argument is extended slightly further than is wholly convincing. The personality of the Wife of Bath as it emerges in her prologue and tale appears rather too strong and coherent, at least to this author, to be as "*dit*-like" as Spearing suggests.

One of the many strengths of this book is Spearing's sensitive and careful close readings of the texts themselves. This is particularly so in the case of Hoccleve's *Series*. One may question the idea that while Hoccleve's textual self seems fragmented, and so does not constitute autobiography, autobiographies in the modern sense always present coherent, unfragmented selves. I am not sure that this is always the case and I would tend to go further than Spearing in seeing autobiographicality in Hoccleve's work.

Most of the works Spearing discusses are central canonical texts, but in his chapter on Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* he not only advances his central argument, but contributes substantially to the emerging scholarship devoted to this fifteenth-century Augustinian. Spearing clearly wants him to be better known, and his astute close reading should stimulate more scholarly focus on Bokenham's writing.

A constant feature of Spearing's approach is his venturing outside the intellectual boundaries of the medieval to enrich his discussion, referencing not only poststructuralist theorists such as Derrida, Lacan, and Barthes, but also the novels of Henry James and the techniques of modern cinema. The use of theory is careful and sparing and never occludes the argument — there is a stepping back from the medieval so as to illuminate it. The book is an excellent corrective to certain tendencies in recent medieval scholarship that overstress hidden qualities and psychological complexities in narrators who are either naïve, obtuse, or unreliable. Though always gracious, Spearing is unconvinced by claims to perceive the inner truth, so that, for instance, overtly misogynistic texts are really feminist. He offers an elegant and coherent alternative way of reading.

Though Spearing confines himself to medieval texts, some may wish to adapt his conceptualization to some early modern texts, particularly those predating the clearer emergence of autobiography as a genre in the later seventeenth century. As stimulating as it is engaging, this is a very important book indeed, which builds on Spearing's earlier *Textual Subjectivity* and should be read widely by medievalists and their students.

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