

Marjorie Curry Woods. *Classroom Commentaries: Teaching the Poetria nova across Medieval and Renaissance Europe*.

Text and Context. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010. xlii + 367 pp. index. append. illus. bibl. \$59.95. ISBN: 978-0-8142-1109-0.

It is not often that the profession is graced with a landmark study such as this one, the fruit of several years of extensive archival work resurrecting the significance of a much admired, but often overlooked, medieval text, Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova*. Written ca. 1202, the 2,000-line poem has often been admired for its witty verse treatment of rhetorical poetics, recognized for its popularity as a work that exemplifies what it teaches, but too often overlooked for what that popularity says about how reading and writing were taught throughout medieval and renaissance Europe, or for what it can teach us about our own pedagogical practices. To answer these questions, Marjorie Woods has delved into the numerous commentaries that accompanied over two hundred years of extant manuscripts of the *Poetria nova*. Her tireless and incisive research has resulted in a book that makes the commentaries surprisingly accessible, while emulating Geoffrey's self-referential process in such a way that she recreates for the reader the actual pedagogical experience the medieval student must have undergone.

The *Poetria nova* has received modern attention primarily due to its possible influence on Chaucer and its similarities to Horace's *Ars poetica*, but we have only just begun to understand it as an art unto itself. Once Edmond Faral made the Latin text available in 1924, followed by several English translations, Woods herself added to the interest with the 1985 publication of an edition and translation of one of the earliest and most popular manuscript commentaries. However, for most scholars, this just whetted our appetite. Finally, in *Classroom Commentaries*, Woods presents us with a thorough, surprisingly accessible, and even delightful discussion of the major commentaries that can serve as our *accessus* for how early scholars, teachers, and humanists interpreted and taught the *Poetria nova*. In a particularly witty opening moment entitled "Off with His Head," Woods evokes the pleasure of the work by revealing how Geoffrey opens his dedication with "the decapitation of the pope, or at least of his name" (2). (Geoffrey dedicates the work to Pope Innocent III

but refers to him as “Pope Nocent,” referring to him by “an ancephalous name” to avoid being “at odds with the metre.”) Just as Geoffrey uses a problem with meter as a teaching moment, Woods embellishes the example to draw our attention to the rhetorical art behind the delight of the work itself. Throughout the book, similar rhetorical flourishes serve to tell us what the commentaries said about the text while emulating how the adolescent mind of the students might have experienced them.

The structure of the book, too, is rhetorically engaging. Beginning with an introductory chapter orienting us to why the *Poetria nova* was so popular in its time, she traces the educational development of the student while revealing the evolution of the scholarly debates that arose. She orders her chapters around the apparent audience for the commentaries, discussing progressively from the school, to the early humanist, to the university level. When she then turns to the seventeenth-century commentaries and a looking ahead, we realize we have experienced not only the growth of the scholarship around the work but an organic scholastic division of the rhetorical and poetic issues involved. Just as she discusses how the commentaries were often in dispute about whether Geoffrey privileged a natural or an artistic order of development (usually dependent on the level of the student for which the commentary was written), the book’s organization achieves both ends. Similarly, Woods appears to be influenced by the dual structure noted by the commentaries on the *Poetria nova*, that Geoffrey structured his work around both the five rhetorical canons and the six parts of a classical oration.

A striking thing about the *accessus* of the commentaries Woods discusses is how they all begin with an application of Aristotle’s four causes to orient the reader to the organic nature of Geoffrey’s self-referential rhetoric. In reading Woods’s book, I couldn’t help but feel she was constantly aware of the four causes behind the rhetorical unfolding of the work she has dedicated years of her life to research. The debate between those who see Geoffrey’s poem as the New Poetry and those who see it as the New Rhetoric becomes moot; Marjorie Woods’s incisive study demonstrates how the distinction is merely semantic, and I agree with her when she argues that the division between educational practice in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is similarly less distinct than we tend to believe.

LINDA BENSEL-MEYERS  
University of Denver