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Title: An Unwitting Return to the Medieval: Postmodern Literary Experiments and Middle English Textuality

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Abstract

Scholarship on postmodern literary experiments tends to hail modes of textuality that deviate from the contemporary norm of the printed page and the codex as new and revolutionary. But such attitudes to emergent literary forms fail to recognise medieval precursors to these apparently new developments. Indeed, regarding these works as an experimental – and therefore novel – aspect of (post)modern literary production contributes to a larger trend, ultimately a function of the periodisation of literature, in which the medieval is seen as entirely Other to the modern. As a result of this conceptual break, postmodern literary experiments tend to enact, and embody, an unwitting return to medieval modes of textuality.

Keywords

Medieval; Postmodern; Textuality; Manuscripts; Narrative; Experimental Literature

An Unwitting Return to the Medieval: Postmodern Literary Experiments and Middle English Textuality

Scholarship on postmodern literary experiments tends to hail modes of textuality that deviate from the contemporary norm of the printed page and the codex as new and revolutionary.¹ But such attitudes to emergent literary forms fail to recognise medieval precursors to these apparently new developments. Indeed, regarding these works as an experimental – and therefore novel – aspect of (post)modern literary production contributes to a larger trend, ultimately a function of the periodisation of literature, in which the medieval is seen as entirely Other to the modern. As a result of this conceptual break, postmodern literary experiments tend to enact, and embody, an unwitting return to medieval modes of textuality.

Here, to illustrate such a return, I intend to discuss some of the correspondences between medieval and postmodern textualities. This article will investigate both discursive and physical textualities. As no one text, neither medieval nor postmodern, will be able to exemplify all the features of their respective textualities, this investigation will range across a variety of literary productions. Similarly, I do not here claim to take into account all facets of either medieval or postmodern textuality, but rather simply to sketch out some similarities and differences between the two. Consequently, focus will be placed on three aspects in particular. These are: the openness and polyvocality of the text; the texts' materiality; and the disruption of narrative linearity. Although listed separately, these facets are interdependent and must

¹ See, for example, the essays collected in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012) which tend to exemplify this position.

be treated as such.² Furthermore, discussions of intentionality will, for the most part, be avoided, not least in order to avoid the pitfalls of the intentional fallacy. Also, by avoiding such discussions of whether Chaucer, for example, *intended* a particular effect in his texts, attention will instead be able to be focussed on the effects of the texts in question, and more importantly, the correspondences and divergences between them.

Much has been made of the open-ended and polyphonic nature of the postmodern text. Works such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* deny us the narrative closure which, according to Frank Kermode, we are accustomed to expect, and as such desire (Kermode 1979, *passim*, but especially pp. 18 and 24). Similarly, works such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Jonathan Coe's *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* are, in a truly Bakhtinian sense, polyphonic, inhabited by multiple voices, and dissenting perspectives and opinions. The postmodern text is antagonistic to the notion of a closed and unitary narrative. But what of the medieval text?

As noted by David Greetham, the medieval period is often thought of as one of "textual certitudes, or at least a hope for such certitudes" (Greetham 2002, p. 36). Following attitudes to the immutability of the Word of the Bible, it is assumed that such an attitude was held towards all other texts, and furthermore, that such an attitude would have gone unquestioned by medieval writers. Such prejudices extend to the critical field in which "[in] most cases, theoretical discussions of closure and openness simply exclude medieval texts from consideration" (McGerr 1998, p. ix). In the light of actual evidence provided by medieval texts, however, such a position becomes untenable. For McGerr, for example, "inconclusiveness is a major feature of Chaucer's

²As Roland Barthes notes, "It would be futile to try to separate out materially works from texts." (Barthes, 1977, p. 156)

poetry”, which “inscribe[s] the problem of reading conclusively” (McGerr 1998, pp. ix and 1). If we look at the *Parliament of Fowls* it is easy to see that notions of the open-text and the polyphonic are undoubtedly applicable: there is an array of voices, avian and otherwise, which express multiple, and often conflicting, points of view; the formel’s choice to delay her decision by a year is, in effect, deferred indefinitely by the end of the poem; the “certeyn thing” (*Parliament of Fowls*, p. 385, l. 20) which the narrator seeks is never found, and at the end of the poem we are told his search continues – “I wok, and othere bokes tok me to / To reede upon, and yit I rede alwey” (*Parliament of Fowls*, p. 394, ll. 695-6); and the dream is an interpretation of, and is occasioned by, Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis*, which the narrator reads before falling asleep, but it is not a strict reflection of its content, and as such is a form of *reécriture* which emphasises the instability and impermanence of literary works. Indeed, as David Aers suggests, the text appears to be “finely resistant to authoritative closures of all kinds” (Aers 1981, p. 14). The poem even resists the interpretations of a harmonious, if not fully closed, ending as argued separately by Rosemarie P. McGerr and Judith Ferster. McGerr posits that “the roundel sung by representatives from each group of birds [...] provides an image of harmony that balances the earlier debate” (McGerr 1998, p. 83) and that “[t]he roundel that the birds sing reflects the balance between continuity and closure that the end of the dream creates” (McGerr 1998, p. 83), while Ferster claims that “[t]he poem finds some causes for celebration. The roundel celebrates the fact that most of the time, with or without universal agreement on problems like love, the world goes ‘round.” (Ferster 1985, 64). Such interpretations overlook the status of the ‘roundel’ within the manuscript tradition: as Helen Cooper notes, “[f]ew readers ever realize that the roundel at the end of the *Parliament of Fowls* does not appear in that form in any manuscript, and is completely omitted by most” (Cooper 1998, p. 85). Indeed, the

roundel is only found 'complete' in Cambridge, University Library, Gg. 4.27; it is not found in the form conventionally printed – that of a roundel – and it is in a hand considerably later than the rest of the manuscript, suggesting that it is non-Chaucerian (Hanna 1996, 1987). Thus the poem, which should likely lack the roundel, resists a sense of closure, and is consequently more 'open' than is often thought to be the case.

Likewise, the *Canterbury Tales* also resist a sense of closure, and are without question polyphonic. Leaving aside the fact that the *Tales* may or may not be complete, which in itself contributes to the sense of openness inherent in the text, the tales themselves often actively resist a sense of closure or unitary perspectives.³ For example, in her prologue, the Wife of Bath pleads: "I praye to al this compaignye, / If that I speke after my fantasye, / As taketh not agrief of that I seye, / For myn entente nys but for to pleye" (*Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, p. 107, ll. 189-92). She is thus fully aware of her textualisation of her own life, and that her narrative is invariably partisan; her narrative is just one among many that are possible.⁴ Similarly, in introducing *The Tale of Melibee* after *Sir Thopas* has been cut short, Chaucer-as-narrator warns his audience that although they may have heard variant versions of the tale, each of them is to be viewed as truthful, since the 'essential meaning' is the same: "hir sentence is al sooth" (*Sir Thopas*, p. 216, l. 946). He thus highlights the existence of multiple perspectives and narrativisations. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* also subverts the notion of a single meaning of a text. Multiple opinions and possible morals are given by Chauntecleer, Pertelote, Russell and the narrator, but despite the suggestion that we "[t]aketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille" (*Nun's Priest's Tale*, p. 261, l. 3443), we are unable to do so, and the instruction rather serves to highlight the multiplicity of possible meanings that co-exist within one

³This could either be seen as part of Chaucer's open structure, or as evidence that it was left unintentionally incomplete. Regardless, the effect is a text which is undoubtedly open.

⁴ As also suggested by Kiser (1991, p. 137).

narrative. Indeed, Stephen Manning here rightly sees Chaucer as “poking fun at those who felt that a poem had to have some moral in order to justify its existence” (Manning 1960, p. 416). The lack of resolution to a single moral thus allows interpretation to continue indefinitely, leaving the text forever open.

In addition to tales being open on an individual basis, the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole also resists closure. McGerr suggests that “[a]s individual literary creations, most of the tales told by the pilgrims at first seem closed, but because they are included in the work as a whole that closure is revealed to be an illusion” (McGerr 1998, p. 152). While her assertion that tales by the pilgrims seem closed is questionable, her overall conclusion is sound. The inclusion of apparently separate narrative units within a larger whole which, whether unfinished or intentionally open-ended, does not provide closure, highlights the illusory and arbitrary nature of all narrative closure; indeed, as Ferster suggests, “[s]ince the process of interpretation is perpetual, only the end is arbitrary; the pilgrims have not completed their game or their journey. Interpretation can never be finished, only stopped” (Ferster 1985, p. 156).

The manuscript witnesses to the *Tales* further deny the possibility of a single, stable narrative. Two of the most important sources for the *Canterbury Tales* (the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts), despite being produced by the same scribe, present the tales in radically different orders, and even contain different numbers of works (Boffey and Edwards 2006, p. 41). By presenting the tales in differing orders, the reader’s perception of the relations between tales and between characters is inevitably altered. The existence, then, of more than one text which has a claim to be called the *Canterbury Tales* problematises the notion of the stable text. This is a point at which medieval textuality may well be thought of as diverging from postmodern textuality, but

in actual fact there are a number of postmodern literary experiments which function in very similar ways. Marc Saporta's 1962 work, *Composition No. 1*, is one of these texts. Commonly called a 'book-in-a-box', *Composition No. 1* is presented to the reader as 150 unbound pages in a small cardboard box. The pages are unnumbered and only printed on one side. Each page contains a minimal, although apparently self-contained, narrative. The reader is invited to 'shuffle' the pages and to read them in any order, and to read as many or few pages as is desired. Regardless of the order, when read in succession a narrative is produced between pages. There is therefore no fixed start or end point, and likewise there is no fixed length to the narrative. It thus has striking correspondences with the experience of reading the *Tales* in different manuscript witnesses. In both cases, as a result of the human tendency to narrativise – a function of what Kermode calls the "synthesizing consciousness" (Kermode 1979, p. 56) – a narrative is formed between the constituent elements of the work, regardless of order; individual events, located on individual pages, are thus given the appearance of causality. The narrative produced by such a tendency, however, is different for different orders, be they of unbound pages or Chaucerian fragments. B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969) works in a similar manner, and is perhaps closer to Chaucerian textuality. The work is again a 'book-in-a-box', but instead of being completely unbound, the reader is presented with a text formed of twenty-seven pamphlets, which, apart from the first and last, are to be read in any order, with the purpose being that multiple narratives can be produced using the same constituent parts. This has resonances with the variously ordered fragments of the *Canterbury Tales*, and also the medieval *pecia* system of manuscript circulation.⁵ Such texts are also only ever provisional: with no set order, no stable text is ever produced. For each reader the text is different, as is the

⁵ For a discussion of the *pecia* system, see Andrew Taylor 1999 p. 354.

narrative produced for them (unless one consults either of the British Library's two copies of *Composition No. 1*, both of which have regrettably been bound by librarians [Coe 2011]).

The unfortunate actions of the British Library's librarians, however, illustrate the hold that the printed realist novel has over our conception of what a literary work should be: fixed, immutable, stable.⁶ This is one area in which medieval textuality, while having similar effects, goes beyond the possibilities for openness and provisionality to which most postmodern works can aspire. As much as postmodern texts may emphasise their inherently unstable and provisional natures, the circumstances of production surrounding the medieval manuscript ensure the medieval text's singularity. While postmodern texts in the vast majority of cases are mechanically reproduced in volume, each contemporary manifestation of a medieval text is unique. While the reading experience of *Composition No. 1* will likely be different for every reader, each individual copy will be, immediately after production, identical, or at least be made up of identical components. The same cannot be said for different manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*. As each copy is produced by a scribe from an exemplar (or indeed exemplars), even with a *literatim* scribe, variations – perhaps even as slight as different forms of abbreviation, although quite likely major changes – will inevitably be introduced. As the texts proliferate, and copies are made from the copies, and so on, new texts are continually produced which are slightly different from their predecessors. Medieval manuscript texts are therefore inherently unstable and forever provisional. Assuming the loss of the authorial text – which in the case of Chaucer is unquestionable (Boffey ad Edwards 2006, 35) – recourse to an authority becomes impossible, even if

⁶ One could also argue that their actions are a violence against the text, perhaps motivated by fear of the open text. To bind such a text is, logically, as absurd as it would be to unbind a murder mystery, and having 'the butler did it' relocated to the first page.

such a course of action were desirable.⁷ Rather, we are left with a multiplicity of texts, without any concept of a stable text which each copy 'should' resemble.⁸ This produces a situation in which we can be left with widely divergent readings of what is ostensibly, according to conventional thinking, the same text. Such a situation is evident when looking at the various textual witnesses of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. Indeed, as Beverly Kennedy notes, the Hengwrt Manuscript portrays the Wife of Bath as being far more chaste than the Ellesmere Manuscript: "[i]n the first she appears to be boasting of her unwillingness to live in chastity [...] In the second, she is simply explaining that she prefers one form of chastity to another" (Kennedy 1997, p. 26). Similarly, the scribe of Cambridge, Dd. 4.24 repeatedly makes misogynistic marginal comments surrounding her prologue (Kennedy 1997, p. 31). Thus different textual witnesses of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* take advantage of the work's inherent ambiguity with regard to her sexuality, thereby producing contrasting views of her character. Similarly, the numerous fifteenth-century continuations of the *Canterbury Tales* add an extra dimension to the text's provisionality and further the process started by Chaucer's original scribes. In this way, Chaucer's scribes and continuators inevitably transgress Chaucer's prayer in *Troilus and Criseyde*: "So prey I God that non myswrite the, / Ne the mys metre for defaute of tonge" (*Troilus and Criseyde* p. 584, ll. 1795-6). Of course, such a plea rather than having any tangible effect, instead serves to foreground Chaucer's powerlessness in the face of manuscript culture, and his acute awareness of the inevitably provisional nature of medieval literary production.

⁷ Indeed, given medieval authors' own biases and the fact that medieval authors frequently reworked their texts, to suggest that the authorial text would, without question, carry more authority is fallacious. With regard to the Hoccleve autographs, for example, Roger Ellis notes their inherent untrustworthiness (2001, p. 1).

⁸ Although stemmatics may attempt to recover an earlier version of the text, this is not to say that the earliest version recoverable resembles closely an authorial text. For a discussion of the problems inherent with this form of editing, see Moffat and McCarren 1998.

Another element central to the textuality of both medieval and postmodern works is their materiality, their physical existence. While novels of the realist mode attempt, as Brian McHale suggests, to “suppress or neutralize” their materiality, such a statement is applicable neither to medieval texts nor postmodern literary ‘experiments’ (McHale 1989, p. 181). Medieval manuscript texts by their very nature are, as Andrew Taylor notes, “unique objects” (Taylor 1999, p. 353). Each page of the manuscript book will be slightly different from the last – in size, thickness, colour, and texture – and as such the material is never fully suppressed by the discursive; the variations ensure that the text’s physicality is always at the forefront of the reader’s mind. Blank pages towards the end of quires function similarly.⁹ Different scribal hands, let alone the fact that variations will occur within the same hand, also contribute to this effect. The discursive further draws attention to the material: in the prologue to the *Miller’s Tale*, for example, the narrator suggests that in order to avoid the tale of “harlotrie” (*The Miller’s Prologue*, p. 67, l. 3184) told in a “cherles [...] manere” (p. 67, l. 3169), we should “[t]urne over the leef and chese another tale” (p. 67, l. 3177). Attention is therefore drawn to the *Tales’* material existence.

Reacting against a print culture which seeks to render the material transparent, many postmodern literary experiments also foreground their materiality, but tend to do so in a more ostentatious and self-conscious manner. *Composition No. 1*, mentioned above, requires the reader to physically manipulate the text by rearranging the order of its pages, which, simply put, draws attention to the pages’ real-world existence. Likewise, the lack of binding makes the process of ‘turning the leaf’ slightly more difficult, making apparent an action which is normally unconscious. Further, the lack of

⁹N.F Blake notes that several pages, particularly at the end of quires, are left blank in the Hengwrt Manuscript (1985, pp. 60-1). As McHale notes, blank pages are used in many postmodern works to foreground materiality (1989, p. 183).

binding means that the pages are prone to slip out of order and stack imperfectly; the mixed feelings of novelty and anxiety which this engenders underscores the physicality of the text.¹⁰ Indeed, texts such as *Composition No. 1* and, to a lesser extent, *The Unfortunates*, in a similar way to the *Canterbury Tales*, subvert Kermode's suggestion that "it is one of the great charms of books that they have to end" (Kermode 1979, 24). Such is evidently not the case with either medieval or postmodern works which – whether through continuation and *réécriture*, or variable orders and formal innovation – do not have fixed narrative end-points.

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* is another recent literary experiment, in which he ostensibly creates a new text from an old – Bruno Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles*. In this work, Foer literally carves his new text from the old: the *Tree of Codes* constitutes 285 unique leaves die-cut from the pages of the *Street of Crocodiles*, each of which carries a few spread out words and large gaps through which the pages to come can be seen. While this recalls the medieval literary hallmark of "extensive borrowing and reworking" (Wogan-Browne, *et al.* 1999, p. 10), the fragility of the pages, which are more empty space than paper, also ensures that the reader must always pay attention to the materiality of the book. The *Tree of Codes*, through its literal transparencies, thus becomes materially opaque. Indeed, as McHale notes of other texts which foreground their materiality in similar ways to both this text and that mentioned above, "[w]e are forced to manipulate the book as a physical object, thus never losing sight of the ontological 'cut' between the projected world and the material book" (McHale 1989, p. 192). The *Tree of Codes* then, through its physical presence, purposefully draws

¹⁰ It is undoubtedly true, as Tom Uglow notes in the 'Introduction' leaf to *Composition No. 1*, that "the instinct not to manipulate the 'deck' is almost overwhelming. There is nothing as disconcerting as the sensations of holding a loose sheaf of papers, with no numbers, no chapters, with a hundred and fifty beginnings and a hundred and forty nine endings" (n.p.).

attention to its material reality, re-enacting the inevitable physical presence of manuscript texts.

Another feature of the *Tree of Codes* is that, as a result of the die-cut pages, it is hard to read the work linearly, as the words to come on the next page, or indeed next 50 pages, can always be seen, and thus impose upon the narrative present. In this way, the text – both verbal and material – subverts the possibility of an unquestioned linearity, providing a work which instead approaches a condition of textual simultaneity.¹¹ The condition of simultaneity is also approached in many medieval texts, although in a less conspicuous, but more ubiquitous manner. A great number of Middle English manuscripts contain marginal or interlinear glosses, which leads to a situation in which the reader is unsure how to read the text: the main text block first? The glosses? Or, as is most likely, skip back and fore between the two? Glosses disrupt the possibility of linear narrative, instead forcing the reader to choose how he or she will proceed in reading the text.¹² The use of images as well as text in both medieval and postmodern works functions in a similar manner. While postmodern and medieval texts may include images which have different purposes and effects, both cause the disruption of linear narrative.¹³ As it is impossible for both to be ‘read’ at once, the reader must, much like the case of glossing above, improvise a system of ‘reading’, which will likely mean that

¹¹ Although as McHale (1989, p. 180) notes, a “simultaneous reading of two or more texts at once is, strictly speaking, impossible”, this does not hinder many postmodern texts from being characterised by attempting to produce such a condition.

¹² McHale 1989 similarly argues that “parallel texts [...] force the reader to improvise an order of reading” (p. 180). Although speaking of glosses in postmodern works, his suggestion that “the various formats of glossing a text [...] foreground the materiality of the book” (192) still holds true.

¹³ Jonathan Safran Foer uses images in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, for example, to convey the effects of traumatic events caused after the September 11th terrorist attacks (as discussed by Pabst 2008). Other postmodern works use what McHale calls “anti-illustration” (1989, p. 189), that is, illustrations and photographs which are unrelated to the main body of the text and signify nothing, in order to disrupt narrative. Illustrations of Chaucer manuscripts, while of course not so theoretically grounded, also disrupt the linear narrative. The illustration of the Wife of Bath in the Ellesmere Manuscript, for example, does not reflect the narrative content of her tale, but is a character portrait, showing her with whip in hand sitting astride her horse (Kennedy 1997, pp. 34-5). The reader is encouraged by the illustration’s presence to read the image against the text, which means that the text is not read without distraction.

the reader jumps back and fore between image and text, shattering the illusion of the purely discursive text divorced of its material existence.

What can thus be seen from this comparison of medieval and postmodern textualities, although brief, is that there are undoubtedly compelling correspondences between the two. This is not to say that they function in the same ways or indeed for the same purposes, but some facets of postmodern textuality undoubtedly resonate with the material and discursive textuality of some Middle English works. Indeed, in many instances – such as their foregrounding of their material existence – some postmodern literary experiments seem to enact a ‘return to the medieval’, in which they unconsciously ape and hyperbolise the experience of reading a medieval text. But since such a return is unconscious and unwitting, they are nevertheless – despite historical actuality – able to claim as new, novel, and revolutionary forms of textual praxis that have roots that spread back far earlier in time. However, it must be kept in mind, as Robert M. Jordan suggests, that “if the critical theory and ‘experimental’ practice of our own time helps us to define Chaucer’s poetics, we must also recognise the limits of the comparison” (Jordan 1987, p. 173). When comparing these textualities, we must remember that Chaucer is of course pre-modern, and that it is only the dogma of the heyday of print and modernist criticism which has defined the medieval, in terms of its textuality and material embodiment at least, as an inferior and alien Other.¹⁴ While seeking out resonances between the medieval and postmodern is a useful exercise in suggesting that the medieval is not so entirely alien, so other, so completely different from today’s literature – and likewise, that the (post)modern is not so divorced from the past as it may seek to claim – at the same time we must be careful not to go beyond

¹⁴ As Greetham (2002, p. 42) notes, “it is only through the invocation of some Middle Ages that we keep ourselves modern.” Indeed, the ‘modern’ is always formed through an Othering of an earlier period.

noting correspondences. To say that medieval and postmodern literatures worked on the same principles and had equal effects – in essence, were equivalent – would be to subsume one into the other, to homogenise, to eradicate the *différance* which is so highly prized by postmodernists, and was evidently at the heart of Chaucer's own poetics.

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