Introduction

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This is the first general history of medieval literary theory and criticism. It has been achieved through a long process of selection and compromise. When the project originally was conceived, we did not know (we could not have known then) what quantity and quality of materials awaited us, what would happen when scholars from a wide range of disciplines, segregated within the modern academy, would come together and pool their expertise – and, indeed, be encouraged to work on materials which had hitherto been ignored, or unexplored from the perspective of literary theory and criticism.

For a long time this subject has suffered from a refusal to believe in its very existence. George Saintsbury, in his *History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe* (1900–4), declared that 'the Middle Ages were . . . certainly not Ages of Criticism'; 'their very essence was opposed to criticism in any prevalence' (I, p. 373). Writing some forty years later, in his *English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase*, J. W. H. Atkins challenged Saintsbury's claim, yet supposed that the period was 'one of confused thinking in literary matters' (p. 3). The 1957 short history of literary criticism by W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks felt obliged to seek aesthetic, rather than distinctively literary, theory in the Middle Ages, and came away disappointed that 'no new theory of beauty, of fine art in general, or of poetry' is offered by St Thomas Aquinas or 'other theologians of the high Middle Ages' (p. 126). Giovanni Boccaccio's account of poetics in his *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods* is, however, given honourable mention. Charles Osgood had performed a major service to the history of literary criticism by publishing in 1930 a translation of substantial extracts from that treatise; this challenged the tendency to see Dante as the single oasis of theoretical sophistication in a cultural desert (Saintsbury had characterised him as the 'one mighty figure' who passes on 'the torch from Aristotle and Longinus, through unknowing ages, to Coleridge and Sainte-Beuve'; p. 3). Hazard Adams' attractive anthology of critical texts, *Critical Theory since Plato* (1971), includes extracts from Aquinas, Dante and Boccaccio. Far more radically, the 1974 collection *Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations*, which O. B. Hardison compiled in collaboration with A. Preminger and K. Kerrane, attempted to

lay to rest the myth that the Middle Ages were ignorant of Aristotle's *Poetics* by including the first modern English translation of Hermann the German's Latin rendering of Averroes' Arabic commentated version. This was the dominant interpretation of the *Poetics* for over four centuries, Hardison asserted, until Ludovico Castelvetro published his treatise in 1570. (Subsequently, the extent of the influence of the Averroistic *Poetics* has been questioned, but there is no doubt that it found a readership in the thirteenth-century University of Paris, and it stands as a striking example of the medieval acculturation of a classical text.)

The seminal articles by G. Przychocki (1911), E. A. Quain (1945) and R. W. Hunt (1948) on the *accessus ad auctores*, school prolegomena to the prescribed trivium texts wherein major critical issues are raised, did not impinge significantly, if at all, on the writers of general histories or the anthologists; the same was largely true of R. B. C. Huygens' editions of a selection of *accessus* (1954) and Conrad of Hirsau's *Dialogus super auctores* (1955). But substantial work was being done on medieval rhetoric; R. McKeon's inspirational 1952 article is a foundation stone of the subject, while in the 1970s J. J. Murphy published a landmark history of medieval rhetoric, a translation of three rhetorical arts (representing the arts of poetry, preaching and letter-writing), and a collection of essays on medieval eloquence. Brian Stock and Winthrop Wetherbee anticipated later approaches to the subject with their studies (both published in 1972) of the Neoplatonic literary theory associated with the so-called 'School of Chartres'. However, vestiges of the 'Saintsbury view' persisted, and continue to persist. 'The Middle Ages . . . were not in fact ages of literary theory or criticism . . . It was an age of theological thinking in a theologically oriented and theocratic society. Such a society does not characteristically promote the essentially humanistic activity of literary criticism . . .'. Thus wrote Wimsatt and Brooks in 1957 (p. 154). As late as 1995, Peter Barry managed to avoid any mention of the Middle Ages, leaping from the *Poetics* of Aristotle – deemed to be 'the earliest work of theory' – to *The Apology for Poetry* of Sir Philip Sidney, who is termed 'the first prestigious name in English writing about literature' (pp. 21–2).[1] All kinds of questions are begged here. How transhistorical are terms like 'literature', 'theory' and 'criticism', and is 'literary criticism' (whatever that means) really an 'essentially humanistic' (whatever that means) activity? Furthermore, is 'theological thinking' essentially antithetical to 'literary criticism'?

[1] The chapter on 'Literary Theory in the Middle Ages' in Richard Harland's *Literary Theory from Plato to Barthes* (1999) occupies a mere seven pages, and contains the assertion that 'drama disappeared from the scene until the very last phase of the Middle Ages' (p. 23). The thriving vernacular traditions of mystery and miracle plays are thereby ignored, not to mention the transformation of classical notions of drama at the hands of Aristotle's Arabic interpreters.

An initial, and narrowly pragmatic, answer to most of these questions may be ventured with reference to the Cambridge University Press guidelines for the *History of Literary Criticism* of which this volume forms part. These require that attention should be paid to the 'evolution of the concept of literature', the growth of literary study within institutions, the formation and re-formation of the literary canon, the emergence and development of genres, the relationship between theory and practice, and 'continuities and relationships between different historical periods'. Given that in the Middle Ages 'literature' did not occupy a privileged space in contrast with other texts, what we have offered is, inevitably, a compromise, which seeks to address issues of a kind which other volumes in this *History* have deemed to be 'literary', while respecting the otherness of medieval textuality and the types of institution – elementary school, monastery, university, court, etc. – which provided the economic and intellectual frameworks for textual production.

Fuller answers have been offered, and are still in the process of being offered, in what has been a 'golden age' for the study of medieval literary theory and criticism, beginning in the 1980s and continuing to the present day. Substantial contributions have been made by, *inter alia*, Judson B. Allen (friars as critics, the 'ethical poetic'); Karl-Heinz Bareiss (discussions of comedy); Christopher Baswell (the interpretation and influence of Virgil in medieval England); Robert Black (Italian schooling and commentaries); Rosalind Brown-Grant (the *querelle de la Rose*); Martin Camargo (rhetorics of prose composition); Mary Carruthers (imagination and memory); Thomas Conley (Byzantine rhetoric); Rita Copeland (the relations between rhetoric and exegesis within medieval translation); John Dagenais (Juan Ruiz and the ethics of reading); Gilbert Dahan (scholastic poetics at the University of Paris); Paule Demats (*fabula* in Latin theory and French literature); Peter Dronke (twelfth-century theory of integumental fiction); Kantik Ghosh (hermeneutic theory and practice in Wycliffite and anti-Wycliffite texts); Fernando Gómez Redondo (Iberian poetics); Walter Haug (the emergence of a semi-autonomous poetics in Middle High German); Ralph Hexter (Ovid in the medieval schools); Tony Hunt (the Latin grammar textbooks used in England); Martin Irvine (*grammatica* as the central discipline concerned with literacy, language and literary interpretation); H. A. Kelly (theory of tragedy); Udo Kindermann (theory of satire); Alastair Minnis (theory of authorship; traditions of commentary on sacred and secular texts); Glending Olson (literature as recreation); Suzanne Reynolds (satire and scholastic linguistics); Bruno Sandkühler (Dante commentary); John O. Ward (Ciceronian rhetoric); Julian Weiss (Castilian literary theory); Edward Wheatley (Aesop commentary and reception); and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne with her fellow-contributors to *The Idea of the Vernacular* (Middle English literary theory). Many significant treatises and commentaries have now been edited; helpful

finding-lists of texts in manuscript have been provided by such scholars as Frank T. Coulson, Birger Munk Olsen and Bruno Roy, and the ongoing *Catalogus translationum et commentariorum* (originated by Paul Kristeller in 1960) serves as a spur to continuing work on the medieval reception of classical literature.

As editors we have suffered from an embarrassment of riches, and have been obliged to be selective, particularly in view of the guidelines set by Cambridge University Press which required a single volume for the entire period from Late Antiquity until the fifteenth century. The general brief for the *History* was to produce an account of Western literary criticism which would deal with both literary theory and critical practice; such fields of knowledge as history of ideas, linguistics, philosophy and theology were deemed 'related' but not essential, to be drawn upon when necessary but not forming part of the central core of the enterprise. The main consequence of this remit has been the omission of any substantial treatment of medieval exposition of the sacred text – the Old and New Testaments and certain patristic materials – but this should not be seen as any lack of respect for the importance of scriptural commentary within medieval textual culture, and we would vigorously contest O. B. Hardison's exclusion of biblical exegesis from medieval literary criticism. No book was more assiduously studied during the Middle Ages than the Bible; no text received more careful exegesis. Indeed, certain theoretical issues achieved initial definition within medieval exposition of the sacred page, whence they passed into secular poetics (good examples being afforded in Italian theoretical discussions of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries). Far from 'theological thinking' being essentially antithetical to 'literary criticism', on many occasions it served as a major stimulus. In any case, theologians received an educational grounding in the liberal arts (though the extent and depth varied according to time and place), and many of the analytical techniques they applied in interpreting Scripture had been acquired as their schoolteachers led them through such 'set texts' as Priscian, Ovid and Juvenal; some distinguished *artistae* went on to produce important biblical scholarship, Peter Abelard and Robert Kilwardby being two notable examples among many.

It is simply incorrect to claim, as some have supposed, that every single scriptural passage had assigned to it four distinct 'senses' or levels of meaning, i.e. the literal, the allegorical, the tropological (or moral) and the anagogical (whereby the mind is lifted up to the celestial goals of the Christian life). Some passages certainly received that treatment, but not all, and St Gregory the Great memorably warned against trying so hard to find profound meaning hidden deep in a passage that one neglected its literal sense, thereby losing that which can be apprehended without difficulty on the surface (*Moralia in Job*, dedicatory letter; PL 75, 5-16).

St Augustine, who famously took great delight in extravagant allegorisation of the Song of Song's beautiful woman with teeth 'like flocks of sheep' (4:2), nevertheless warned against taking 'literal expressions as though they were figurative', lest sound moral doctrine be set at naught (*De doctrina christiana* 2.6.7–8; 3.10.14). Furthermore, the ancient rhetorical idea that one should suit style to audience functioned powerfully in late-medieval uses of scriptural texts; a commentator could engage in rigorous literal/historical analysis of some textual crux, while a preacher (perhaps the commentator himself, performing a different function) could subject that same passage to virtuoso allegorising which moved far beyond 'the letter' – a common justification being that preaching sought to move rather than prove. The existence of various fads and fashions within exegesis should also be acknowledged. In the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries certain textual features (metaphor, parable, fable, etc.) which hitherto had been assigned to the *sensus allegoricus sive mysticus* were deemed to be types of literal sense or in some way comprised within it; indeed, the paradoxical notion of 'double literal sense' features in the exegesis of, for example, Nicholas of Lyre, William of Nottingham and the fifteenth-century Spanish polymath Alfonso de Madrigal. Given all these relativities, it would be highly reductive to view the history of medieval biblical exegesis in terms of a perpetual confrontation between the 'allegorical' and the 'literal' senses of Scripture. In a manner of speaking, both Henri de Lubac (whose monumental *Exégèse médiévale* emphasises the continuity and continued importance of allegorical interpretation) and Beryl Smalley (in whose 'grand narrative' the literal sense triumphs as the spiritual exposition declines) were right – or, better, they saw disparate aspects of a complicated cultural situation which does not easily (if at all) lend itself to positivistic solution. The senses of Scripture were subjected to the requirements (whether real or supposed) of different audiences, and the demands of the different professionals who had to cater for those audiences. Bible scholars were fully prepared to offer one type of exegesis in one place and another type in another, bending one and the same text to take on different meanings. In many cases what mattered crucially was not whether the Bible *should* be interpreted in one way or another but rather such pragmatic considerations as the specific didactic purpose of the given interpretation and the perceived nature and needs of its target-audience. In sum, medieval exegesis was a lot more flexible and context-specific than has sometimes been allowed.

It is also incorrect to claim that at an early stage the 'fourfold' system of scriptural exegesis was applied extensively to the ancient 'fables of the poets'. On the contrary, many scholars sought to spell out the distance between the two kinds of text, as when the Martianus Capella commentary which may be the work of Bernard Silvester explains that 'allegory is

a mode of discourse [*oratio*] which covers under a historical narrative a true meaning which is different from its surface meaning, as in the case of Jacob wrestling with an angel. An *integumentum*, however, is a mode of discourse which covers a true meaning under a fictitious narrative, as in the case of Orpheus' (ed. Westra, p. 24). A different hermeneutic system developed in respect of secular literature, which may be illustrated from the elaborate version found in the *Ovidius moralizatus* of Pierre Bersuire (d. 1362). The 'literal' reading is an astrological one: for instance, Mars is the hot and dry planet which governs a choleric disposition in man. Naturally, the pagan gods can be seen in terms of natural elements and processes, as when Saturn, who eats his young, is said to be all-devouring time. Historically, the gods are interpreted euhemeristically as men who, through gentile error, came to be worshipped as gods. A wide range of spiritual interpretations, in both positive and negative senses, is on offer: hence Diana may be interpreted either as the Virgin Mary or as Avarice. Bersuire justified such an array of possibilities on the grounds that they would be useful in sermons; more austere minds condemned the use of such distracting frivolities by preachers of the Word of God.

All that having been said, it must be admitted that there was some interaction and cross-influence between the two hermeneutic systems. After all, theologians had been trained in the liberal arts, and commentary on secular texts was part of their intellectual formation (as already noted), and – even more fundamentally – both secular and sacred allegorisation had roots in ancient interpretation of Homer. In the later Middle Ages there may indeed be found certain intriguing applications of one or more of the four scriptural senses to secular poetry, as in some passages of the *Ovide moralisé* and occasionally in Boccaccio's *Genealogia* and Dante-commentary. In his *Convivio* – a ground-breaking 'self-commentary' – Dante himself famously compared and contrasted the 'allegory of the poets' and the 'allegory of the theologians'. But there is scant evidence to support D. W. Robertson's claim, as made in his *Preface to Chaucer* of 1962, that the four senses of scriptural exegesis are to be sought and found in a wide range of medieval texts. Particularly telling is the fact that the early-fifteenth-century defenders of Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose* do not resort to it. However, for Robertson 'medieval literary theory' licenses a reading method which inevitably and invariably discloses textual skirmishes in the age-old war between charity and cupidity. This methodology represents a powerful appropriation of medieval exegesis for the modern interpretation of vernacular literature, but many of Robertson's readers have been unconvinced or even repelled by what they see as a kind of interpretative determinism that impoverishes the possible range of meanings available to authors of literary texts. Antipathy towards what Lee Patterson has termed the critical formation of 'Exegetics' is hardly

conducive to new (much-needed) scholarship on the theological contribution to medieval literary theory and criticism.

Then again, dubious distinctions between 'humanism' and 'scholasticism' have bedevilled the subject, not least because of the assumption (as illustrated above) that 'literary criticism' requires humanistic soil in which to thrive, while by its very nature scholasticism is inimical to the 'critical spirit' (Atkins, p. 2). According to a still-tenacious grand narrative, an early flowering of humanism in the 'twelfth-century Renaissance' was stunted by the advent of thirteenth-century scholasticism, the rediscovered Aristotle having banished the poets; in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries humanism revived, this time putting down stronger roots, and scholasticism – mocked by such innovative thinkers as Erasmus, Ramus, Vives and Valla – died away. This view is untenable for many reasons. For a start, commentaries on the Latin *auctores* continued to be produced in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; indeed, some of the most impressive examples date from this later period, including three major thirteenth-century commentaries on Ovid (William of Orléans' *Bursarii Ovidianorum*, John of Garland's *Integumenta Ovidii*, and the anonymous 'Vulgate' commentary on the *Metamorphoses*), the commentaries on Boethius and Seneca which Nicholas Trevet produced in the early fourteenth century, and of course the commentaries on Dante's *Commedia*, written in both Latin and Italian. The thirteenth century also saw a burgeoning of massive compilations, which collected together *auctoritates* (i.e. extracts, sententious passages) culled from the experts on every subject. Furthermore, at a time when the study of grammar had developed, in one of its main branches, into speculative analysis of the theoretical structures of language itself, theologians and scriptural exegetes were devising a comprehensive interpretative programme for examining the richly varied styles and modes to be found in the different books of the Bible, together with the diverse roles and functions, both literary and moral, believed to have been performed by the inspired but human authors of Scripture. All these arguments lend support to R. W. Southern's provocative assertion that, 'far from the humanism of the twelfth century running into the sand after about 1150 to re-emerge two centuries later, it has its fulfilment in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries – in the period which the humanists of the Renaissance most despised' (*Medieval Humanism*, p. 31). If it is indeed true, as Southern contends, that 'the period from about 1100 to about 1320' was 'one of the greatest ages of humanism in the history of Europe: perhaps the greatest of all', then the literary theory produced in that period may be deemed a product of humanism of a high order.

Last but certainly not least, the 'scholastic' period saw an extraordinary flourishing of vernacular literature (the *Roman de la Rose*, Dante, Juan Ruiz, Chaucer . . .), though of course the relationship between the schools

and the milieux in which those works were produced is complicated and contested. It would certainly be naïve to assume that 'humanism' is essentially and invariably supportive of vernacular literature: several of the Italian humanists took Dante to task for having written in the vernacular rather than in Latin.

It may also be argued that, in respect of Latin textual culture in particular, the process of transition and change from 'medieval' to 'Renaissance' has been oversimplified and distorted. Even the most 'original' literary theory produced in late-medieval Italy takes its points of departure and many of its categories and concepts from scholastic literary theory: witness the way in which scholars like Albertino Mussato, Francesco da Fiano and Leonardo Bruni set about discussing the 'usefulness' of poetry, its place within the hierarchy of the sciences, its spiritual and moral senses, the ancient poet-theologians (or 'myth-lovers'), the styles common to both classical and scriptural writers, and so forth. To focus on one major chronological strand: the thirteenth-century Franciscan Alexander of Hales discussed theology as poetry; Albertino Mussato discussed poetry as theology; Pico della Mirandola constructed a poetic theology. We cannot appreciate the significance of any single one of these positions without some awareness of the intellectual continuum of which they formed part.

Such an approach finds ample justification in the research of modern scholars like Walter Ullmann, Paul Kristeller and Charles Trinkaus, from which it may be concluded that aspects of the Aristotelian tradition of learning continued long into the Renaissance, and in Italy scholasticism developed alongside humanism. Concetta C. Greenfield has argued that 'their relationship was dialectical, so that rather than simply opposing each other, they stimulated persistently each other's revival and growth'. The implications for poetic theory were considerable: 'Practically every scholastic statement on poetics is countered by a belligerent humanist answer and vice versa. The investigation of humanist poetics in relation to scholastic poetics casts a new light on many humanist beliefs, and it changes a number of notions traditionally held by scholars who have examined humanist poetics as an isolated growth' (pp. 11–12). We would endorse these views, while entering the caveat that such binary thinking cannot do full justice to the intellectual common ground which was shared by many thinkers who can all too easily be located on one or other side of the divide. Very often they relied on the same authorities and the same theoretical concepts, even in the act of constructing different hierarchies of the sciences and affording poetics different degrees of prestige within those intellectual structures. Neither should the foundational contribution of scholastic culture to post-medieval Europe be undervalued. As R. W. Southern said, 'a large part of the teaching of the medieval schools continued to influence the thoughts and conduct of the majority of people in

western Europe on both sides of the great divide between Roman Catholic and Protestant until the twentieth century, when the long-lasting tincture of scholastic principles which had survived among the great mass of the population of western Europe began to disappear altogether' (*Scholastic Humanism*, p. 1). Here Southern is speaking of 'schools' in the most inclusive sense, rather than designating the schools of philosophy and theology in particular, though they certainly are included in his vision. His enthusiastic *apologia* affords powerful encouragement for careful consideration of 'scholastic' poetics in each and every sense of that adjective. The term 'scholastic poetics' is certainly not an oxymoron; rather it bespeaks a textual culture in which poetry both sacred and profane was frequently described as pertaining to ethics or some higher branch of science, and many schoolmen believed that theology itself was in some sense poetic, particularly in view of the fact that its procedures were different from, and transcended, those of ratiocinative logic and philosophy. Here, then, is an intellectual deposit of major substance and significance, a broad and commodious basis on which later literary thought inevitably, and creatively, built.

These are large issues, and a single-volumed history can only go so far. The present book is essentially a selective history of the literary theory and criticism relating mainly to Western secular literature in the Middle Ages, though we have drawn on religious texts at crucial moments. Beginning with the fundamental institution of the grammar school, in which children were taught the basics of Latin and introduced to the canon of classical authors (augmented with medieval 'classicising' texts of a kind believed to be suitable for young minds), we proceed to the prescriptive rhetorical arts – those 'recipe books' of textuality which showed the reader how to produce a poem, sermon or formal letter. We then focus on the medieval reception of major *auctores*, as manifest in commentary, compilation and appropriation. The volume then takes a synchronic turn, in chapters on those 'textual psychologies' which involved imagination and memory and were conducive to decorous textual pleasure and profitable entertainment. The next two sections return to a basically diachronic approach, grouping together 'early-medieval' and 'late-medieval' traditions of vernacular literary theory and criticism, whilst recognising that at least some of the 'early' traditions continued well into the 'late' period (the Irish/Gaelic and Old Norse/Icelandic traditions provide ample illustration of this); no single historicising template fits all.

The relationship between vernacular literary theory and *Latinitas* is highly complicated. Certain traditions basically transmit Latin terms and values, while others transform them; some use Latin along with their vernacular to express theoretical interests and values which had little if anything to do with Latin literary theory, while within others vernacular

theoretical discourse seems to enjoy a remarkable amount of intellectual autonomy (the Occitan material being particularly rich and strange). Our ambition has been to allow vernacular discourses to speak for themselves, far more loudly than in any previous overview of the medieval contribution to the history of literary criticism. Thus we have sought to respect the diversity and distinctiveness of the respective textual cultures, while being aware of the common ground which many of them inevitably share. Treating every major national/regional unit separately would have resulted in repetitiveness and redundancy, with the same (or at least similar) literary conditions and conventions being discussed with reference to one language after another. Hence our compromise: two chapters (14 and 15) track parallel manifestations of crucial concepts in different countries, whereas others focus on particular places and times, allowing detailed investigation of their specific theoretical contributions. An entire section, comprising six chapters, has been devoted to Italian literary theory, in recognition of its exceptional contribution. Even more space could be assigned in a future history: the commentary traditions on Petrarch and on Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, and the influence of Aristotle's Arab commentators on scholastic and humanistic poetics, await full scholarly investigation (compare p. 254 below). And finally: we travel to Byzantium, entering a world which is markedly different, but in at least some respects intriguingly familiar. If 'criticism' was understood by Byzantine readers or writers 'to have its feet in grammar, its head in rhetoric, and its eyes on moral utility' (as Thomas Conley says; p. 670 below), then most Western European readers and writers would have found little if anything to quibble with in such a claim. Furthermore, in the efforts of Byzantine scholars to preserve the Hellenic heritage in face of threats posed by the barbarous 'Latins' may be found counterpoints to the (far less precarious) hegemony of Latin over the European vernaculars in the medieval West.

Conley's chapter affords a trenchant refutation of the widespread assumption that Byzantine textual culture is marked by 'slavish imitation', 'millennial stasis, abstract judgements devoid of any individuality, and predictable homogeneity' (see p. 691 below). At the beginning of a volume which (quite rightly) affords considerable space to vernacular textual theorising, a similar caveat may be ventured against holding similar assumptions concerning the allegedly stultifying dominance of Latin within Western European textual culture, a dominance which could be escaped only through the subversive resources of some vernacular or other. Medieval Latin was not inevitably hegemonic, patriarchal, misogynistic and repressive of the local, the provincial, or the personal, though in certain contexts it could be any or all of those things – as indeed, could the vernacular. In fact, there was an abundance of 'Medieval Latins'. The Latin of the schools of philosophy and theology was markedly