

## *Introduction* *Failure, Figure, Reception*

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At the end of his great romance *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer famously gives voice to anxiety about the various deformations that might await his poem. Casting his work as diminutive and vulnerable – “litel bok” – the narrator (who at this moment seems to emerge most clearly as the poet himself) prays that no scribe “miswrite” it in a different dialect, nor “mysmetre” it, as such a dialect might wrench its rhythms (v.1795, 1796, 1798).<sup>1</sup> Readers, too, are sources of concern, as they might fail to understand the book. In the face of such threats, an author can simply hope and pray, and call upon his friends – here “moral Gower” and “philosophical Strode” – to take the book under their correction (v.1856, 7). Earlier on, at the start of Book II, similar worries about communication across time are voiced, for “in forme of speche is chaunge” (II.22), and the ancient love story related here may produce resistance and wonder instead of comprehension or compassion. In fact, it’s not even clear that the author is secure in his knowledge that he has produced a work worth preserving. He claims to be desperately challenged by his attempts to navigate his tempestuous subject matter, Troilus’ despair. He calls upon a muse to aid his art of rhyme, for such is his sole contribution to the narrative, the rest supposedly supplied by his fictive Latin source – “as myn auctor seyde, so sey I” (II.18). To make matters worse, our narrator apparently knows nothing about love, and so will inevitably speak “unfelyngly” (II.19).

However, the assured poet is never far from the scene, despite the classic Chaucerian “if I konne” (II.49) that concludes the proem to Book II. Indeed, it is the very identifiability of that “if I konne” with the humble “Chaucerian narrator” found across Chaucer’s writings that allows us to see the confident author at work. Readers may wonder at the doings of Troilus, Pandarus, and Criseyde, but the poet assures his audience that *he* does not wonder, for he knows that each has his or her predilections when it comes to love, and, in addition, “som men grave in tree, some in ston wal” (II.47). The parallelism of love practices and carving invites a

reflection on Chaucer's own practice of carving out his poem; perhaps his choices, his language, and "doings" are beyond question, subject only to the laws he abides by and his various desires. All is as it happens, contingent, and, in the end, irreproachable.

Thus whether we find a scarcely concealed poet-as-*auctor* or a bumbling, unfeeling, rhymers, it seems we encounter a Chaucer fully in control of his formal enterprise. Faulty diction, meter, or sense is ascribed to historical change, lack of scribal acumen, or readerly resistance and incomprehension. The chapters in this volume are unquestioningly interested in these sources of form's mutation. But they are also interested in the way that Chaucer's declaration that "in forme of speche is chaunge" signals an acknowledgment that form itself is constituted by change, and that he is not only offering up polished poetic gems to the ravages of time and unreceptive audiences, but also creating works that expose the incompleteness and self-contradictory nature of form. One need not look far, in Chaucer's *oeuvre*, for formal contradiction, confusion, or excess. In *Troilus and Criseyde* itself we have Book v oddly lacking a full proem, and with a palinode that has produced no wholly satisfying reading. In *The Canterbury Tales* we have a work replete with evidence of both authorial and scribal reworking and reordering, and inconsistencies that may or may not have been intentional. Why does the Man of Law claim to speak in prose, but tell a tale in rhyme-royal stanzas? What should we make of the "Envoy de Chaucer" at the end of the "Clerk's Tale" – a double ballade introduced dramatically as the Clerk's song, but marked in manuscripts as the author's voice? The song itself does not give easy clues to the nature of its voice, which in any case tonally and thematically contradicts the tale itself; the narrative then resumes without any reference to the Envoy. And then there is, of course, the question of the completion or incompleteness of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole. These and various other "cruxes" can be – and often have been – recuperated as contributing to the themes of Chaucer's works. Our collection suggests that it can also be productive to keep faith with formal difficulty, to allow that form can break down, turn against itself, or turn to new ends.

Our introduction and the chapters that follow reveal the ways that form often contains the ingredients for its own subversion, exploring how Chaucer grapples with his mastery of and subjection to form, and how subsequent readers of Chaucer form and re-form his writings. Our collection is oriented around the idea that formalist approaches are not confined to, or solely defined by, a commitment to the idea that "form produces meaning."<sup>2</sup> We are interested in the ways that form can occlude meaning, how Chaucer

sometimes embraces and sometimes resists formal knowledge, and how a work's form can be structured by a variety of agents. Form restrains and frees, preserves a work through time and creates loss, provides pleasure, dissonance, understanding, and ethical danger. The authors collected here treat form in a wide variety of its instantiations: genre, meter, beauty, bodies, spatial and temporal scale, linearity, personification, voice, manuscript collation, print *mise-en-page*, and more. In each case, however, form is a site of challenge, never a vehicle of uncomplicated translation from structure to content, or text to context.<sup>3</sup> While we would not claim that previous or "traditional" formalist readings posit a "simple" translation mechanism, we are making a positive claim that literary form *qua* form may be found to reside in those sites of conflict – where the texture of a literary work appears excessive, disruptive, resistant, or unfinished. The chapters in our collection each approach the question of formal contradiction and change from a different perspective, and below we sketch a brief history of formalist approaches to medieval literature – both to show what is new in our volume and to show that it emerges out of a developing medievalist "new formalism" that is both avowedly historicist and committed to rethinking the relationship between form and history.

### Formalism and Medieval Literature

One can hardly think about the study of English literature in the post-war period without thinking about names like Cleanth Brooks, William Empson, and I. A. Richards. Yet the study of Middle English literature was never dominated by "practical criticism" in the way that other fields were. Chaucer himself figures unevenly in the influential works of formalism or "New Criticism," meriting only a second-order mention in Brooks' *The Well-Wrought Urn*, for example.<sup>4</sup> It is true that Empson presents an extended discussion of *Troilus and Criseyde* in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Yet even with Empson one sees a defensiveness about applying techniques of close reading to a Middle English poet.<sup>5</sup> Empson wards off suggestions that he is attributing modern (or early modern) complexity to instances of medieval simplicity, though he wryly admits that "it would have been fun to maintain that Shakespeare learnt his style from a misunderstanding of Chaucer."<sup>6</sup> Instead he argues that the ambiguity in Chaucer's poetry is evidence of an intrinsic feature of English literature, manifest in some of its earliest incarnations.<sup>7</sup>

When formalist treatments of Chaucer do emerge, it's in a halting fashion. D. Vance Smith has outlined the resistance to formal criticism in

medieval literary study, acknowledging that it “got off to a bad start” with John Speirs’ *Chaucer the Maker* (1951).<sup>8</sup> Thirteen years later A. C. Spearing’s *Criticism and Medieval Poetry* still had to make the argument for the applicability of the new technique of “close reading” to medieval poetry. Spearing must clear ground, explaining that “the modern critic of medieval literature has other choices open to him than either to pretend that it is of the same kind as the work of Shakespeare, Keats, or Hopkins, or to dismiss it entirely as lying beyond his powers.”<sup>9</sup> While acknowledging that medieval poetry presents particular problems for the modern close-reader (the distance of Middle English, complicated textual histories and possibilities for misreading, the specificity of oral performance culture, etc.), Spearing makes the case for formal analysis that is anything but removed from the context of medieval culture. Spearing’s work was not only enormously more successful than Speirs’, but its approach was received more generously, reviewed with great care (if in places quite critically) in the pages of *Speculum*. The reviewer, Richard Hamilton Green, observed in conclusion that “[i]n his close scrutiny of the uses of language and sound in mediaeval English poetry Mr. Spearing reminds us of important matters which have not received the attention they deserve.”<sup>10</sup>

New Critical method truly arrived in Middle English studies with the essays of E. Talbot Donaldson, who gave us “Chaucer the Pilgrim,” the avatar of the “fallible first person singular” that made New Critical irony available to the Chaucerian critic.<sup>11</sup> Donaldson argued against any notion of Chaucer’s rustic, primitive simplicity, insisting instead on the sophistication of Chaucerian style – a style that is indeed simple and comprehensible, and yet in that guise offers an

ability to describe things simultaneously from several distinct points of view while seeming to see them from only one point of view, and thus to show in all honesty the complexity of things while preserving the appearance of that stylistic simplicity which we feel to be so honest and trustworthy.<sup>12</sup>

Yet far from enforcing a facile distinction between the reading of formal and historical properties, Donaldson’s “New Critical” approach was deeply implicated “in the multiplicity of historical contexts that might be brought to bear on the word, the phrase, the work.”<sup>13</sup> As Lee Patterson observed, New Criticism “sought less to extract the poem from its historical context than to find strategies by which to reaffirm the humanist values that had motivated the historicist recovery in the first place.”<sup>14</sup>

Another distinct strand of medieval literary scholarship concerned with form grew out of the study of medieval literary theory, uncovered

in commentaries on scripture, authoritative religious writings, and classical texts. Alastair Minnis outlined “a major change of attitude to the concept of form” in the thirteenth century; newly influential Aristotelian theories of causality shifted emphasis from divine principles of order to the form generated by a human *auctor*.<sup>15</sup> Commentators spoke of two kinds of form, literary style (*forma tractandi*) and structure (*forma tractatus*), by which the *intentio auctoris* was made legible. Minnis explains that the *forma tractatus* in particular was applied to the project of understanding the intention of the author across his entire works. A proper *divisio textus* was understood to be necessary for clarifying an author’s ideas, and clear *ordinatio* essential to distinguishing the statements of the *auctor* from the compiled opinions of other commentators.<sup>16</sup> Such attention to human-authored form established “a common ground on which sacred poetry and profane poetry could meet” and created a robust if contested terrain of literary theory that extended its influence to vernacular poetry.<sup>17</sup> These modes of understanding the shape of a text are not at all disconnected from contemporary modes of reading. Smith calls the *forma tractandi* an “elementary practical criticism” and suggests that medieval links between the *forma tractatus* and *forma tractandi* are akin to connections between historicism and formalism.<sup>18</sup> Medieval literary theory was attuned to style, structure, and authorial agency, as well as affective and moral purpose.

### New Formalisms in Medieval Literary Studies

Medievalist formalisms were thus never (or rarely) ahistorical. And even as new formalism (broadly considered) often positioned itself against New Historicist denunciations of form, it was careful to assert its own compatibility with historical approaches.<sup>19</sup> It is a signal of the shape of the field that one of the special journal issues that announced the formalist renaissance appeared in *Modern Language Quarterly*, a venue that hews closely to the demands of its subtitle, “A Journal of Literary History.”<sup>20</sup> The commitment to historicism has been particularly visible in the works of medievalist literary criticism that overtly announce their emphases on the study of form. In her introduction to the coedited volume *Form and Reform: Reading across the Fifteenth Century*, Kathleen Tonry observes that “form matters now” in medieval literary studies, and also that a methodological “formalism” has been replaced by “an attention to form.”<sup>21</sup> Such attention, she suggests, is more amenable to a criticism that seeks to find the dynamic interplay between form and

history. Eleanor Johnson explains that her book *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages* “addresses the aesthetic effects that particular formal choices have, on both small and large scales, and then moves to theorize how and why they matter in their particular historical contexts.”<sup>22</sup> One finds such formulations of the mutual influence of form and history across recent medieval literary criticism, as in Bruce Holsinger’s claim that “prosody, meter, and genre are just as historically determined *and just as historically determining* as events taking place in the wider cultural sphere.”<sup>23</sup> The large-scale project “Poetic Knowledge in Late Medieval France” produced a range of publications, including the collection *Poetry, Knowledge, and Community in Late Medieval France* and Adrian Armstrong and Sarah Kay’s *Knowing Poetry: Verse in Medieval France from the Rose to the Rhétoriqueurs* – all on the topic of poetic form as vehicle and object of historical, institutional, communal, and individual knowledge.<sup>24</sup> Outside medieval studies, in one of the more recent (and already influential) works of new formalism, Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* posits a shared social space of jostling forms, where literature and politics share formal features and the line between text and context largely dissolves.<sup>25</sup>

Medievalist literary critics are in wide agreement that attention to form can give us access to history, that form can be a powerful historical actor, and that no formal reading is possible without historical context. Such agreement, however, does not confer a univocity on precisely *how* we should attend to form, or what form means. On the one hand, Christopher Cannon warns us that the practice of formalism is not merely the “sprinkling round” of observations about meter, versification, or genre, but rather a commitment to the idea that “all accounts of meaning were accounts of form.”<sup>26</sup> And yet again we have Holsinger’s strong argument that “meter matters.”<sup>27</sup> Cannon’s and Holsinger’s methodologies are not opposed, but there does appear to be a discernible difference between the medievalist criticism that “attends” to form in varied ways, with a number of different historical and theoretical concerns, and the more theoretically inflected criticism that insists on a necessary, encompassing relationship among form, history, and interpretation. Medievalists who theorize form emphasize how formal ambitiousness and inchoateness situate the work in its specific cultural context and yet allow it to reach beyond. It is perhaps in this commitment to the literary as a distinct kind of expression that medievalist theoretical formalism most clearly marks both its difference and continuity with New Historicism – these critics resist any flattening of literary texts into historical “discourse,” insisting upon the particularity of

*literary* form, and yet maintain New Historicism's political commitments, emphasizing the centrality of form in materialist critique.<sup>28</sup>

Theorists of medieval literary form arrive at the specificity of literary form via their emphasis on the shared argument in Hegelian and Marxist philosophy that artistic form functions to register historical experience. Cannon asks us to understand historical context as the wide range of influences and agents that produce a particular literary work and are materially instantiated in that work; he suggests that we

[s]uppose Hegel was right and spirit was a phenomenon, thought an informing principle, and thinking an instrument for shaping the things of the world. Suppose, too, that Marx was Hegel's most ardent disciple in this matter, and ... what he took from Hegel was a belief in the determinate presence of thought in the form of every made thing.<sup>29</sup>

In a similar spirit, Maura Nolan points us to Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theory for its positing of artistic form as the material form of history. It is attention to form that can draw out the "true social content" of an art-work.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Adorno defines form as "the social nexus of everything particular."<sup>31</sup>

How then can such a capacious definition of form – indeed an apparent collapse between form and the sociohistorical – provide a map for literary criticism? Cannon offers a Chaucerian image of dialectical world making that shows how we might begin to approach form from such a perspective. He highlights a moment from *Troilus and Criseyde* in which the narrator likens Pandarus' project of catching Criseyde for Troilus to the building of a house. Such a builder does not "the werk for to bygynne / With rakel hond, but he wol bide a stounde, / And sende his hertes line out fro withinne / Aldirfirst his purpos for to wynne" (1.1066–1069).<sup>32</sup> As Cannon explains, this image of "formation" is both Platonic – form as thought – and Aristotelian – form as specific material object – and it is the "slipperiness" of the medieval concept of form that makes it so useful, allowing for "a bridge between the immaterial and the material."<sup>33</sup> Cannon notes that Chaucer borrows from Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* here, marking an ironic affinity between academic poetic theory and pandering, if not Chaucer's own poetry. A broad formal method would take Chaucer's (and Geoffrey's) image to heart, anatomizing formal features such as meter and metaphor and looking also to "the integration of all those levels, along with any other aspect of a particular text which may be seen to structure it."<sup>34</sup> That "any other aspect" includes the unconscious absorption of a whole host of cultural influences – intellectual, religious, social, and institutional.



Attending to form in this way necessitates knowledge of a complex and variegated historical context, and yet some scholars would suggest that – at its limits – a formalist historicism will lead us necessarily beyond a text’s historical moment. Maura Nolan thus endorses a formal analysis that proceeds by Adorno’s aesthetic theory; such a method, she argues, would not only attend to the relationship between form and history, but can do justice to ways that medieval literary texts exceed any given historical explanation. Adorno critiques the blindness of simplistic or purely empirical historicism – such historicism is “blind to the possibility that art may exist within multiple temporalities at once, blind to the antagonisms which structure the artwork and the potential for freedom that constitutes its truth content, blind to the need for aesthetic judgment.”<sup>35</sup> Nolan observes that “Chaucer, to take the obvious example, will always be more than a court poet, his work always more than Ricardian; where that surplus is to be found is necessarily in the multiplicitous temporalities sedimented in the texts.”<sup>36</sup> To “make the aesthetic turn,” as she enjoins us, would be to attend to the historical situatedness of the medieval work of art, yet in that attention always to remain sensitive to the “modernity of the medieval, the medievalism of the modern.”<sup>37</sup> Andrew Cole argues that dialectics helps us to see the way that authors can engage in “world making” in so richly detailed a fashion that new conceptual futures are brought into being. In turn, dialectics also makes visible the relationships between artistic forms and cultural “concepts,” such that we can see medieval and modern “parallels of articulation” between the two.<sup>38</sup> When we see these parallels, from this perspective, we see history itself in the making.

### The Subversions of Form

The chapters collected in this volume, therefore, by no means celebrate unobstructed access to a historical moment of creation via formal analysis, for – as the scholars discussed above and others variously emphasize – material form is not a direct reflection of the form of human thought. And this is not simply an observation about limitations on the human ability to realize forms that they can imagine. Sometimes the form of the created thing actually exceeds the form of human thought. This is, we argue, something that was understood when the medievals thought about texts, for while they referred to the *intentio auctoris*, it was not what we think of when we refer to the intention that lies behind the work. As Mary Carruthers points out, “‘intention’ is conceived to be within the work itself – the artifact considered as an agent, motivator, and guide through



those stylistic and formal means that, because they draw on conventions and shared traditions, have considerable agency separate from the human, historical author.”<sup>39</sup> What we have, then, is a recognition that human intention, or the originating form of the work, is not “transparently transferred into the artifact.”<sup>40</sup>

Even if they have not invoked the medieval idea of *intentio auctoris*, medieval scholars have understood for quite some time that texts may embody thoughts that we do not recognize as emanating from the human author. Paul Strohm gestures toward this state of affairs when he asks the question, “what can we know about Chaucer that he didn’t know about himself?”<sup>41</sup> He answers this question by talking almost exclusively about how Chaucer’s texts themselves seem to have agency – claiming, for instance, that the text itself possesses an unconscious and that it has the ability to resist our attempts to uncover what it is repressing. “A text’s form may alibi for its thought,” he says, making the case for reading against the “formal demands” of a literary work.<sup>42</sup> This idea might find expression in Cannon’s more general meditation on how, because the making of “made things . . . can absorb cultural knowledge even their maker does not know, it is appropriate to refer to the form of the object, not simply as thought, but as *thinking*.”<sup>43</sup>

These descriptions of form as working against intention by no means evacuate form of significance. As D. Vance Smith writes, “the places where form fails to complete its immanent mission, the points at which preliminary work does not quite come together, are not just the symptoms of form, but are the visible evidence, indeed the very target, of the thought that animates literature.”<sup>44</sup> In a similar vein, Tom Eyers proposes that “[l]iterature stages better than most phenomena the manner in which, far from shutting down the possibility of meaning, the impossibility of any final, formal integration of a structure and its component parts is the very condition of possibility of that structure.”<sup>45</sup> Those moments when form seems to defy the originating idea behind the text, work against the discovery of the text’s secrets, or even work against the formal demands of the very story it tells can be just as productive when we do not seek to recuperate them as consonant with a unified notion of authorial intention or even thematic coherence. Our contributors share an emphasis on the failures of form: the resistance to poetic terminology, to formal consolation, to formal interpretation, beauty, and even to literariness itself. Caroline Levine critiques scholars for spending too much time attending to “formless or antiformal experiences” – “fissures and interstices, vagueness and indeterminacy, boundary-crossing and dissolution.”<sup>46</sup> Yet the chapters

in this volume do not fall into a binary of treating form or antiform, or describing the successful deployment of form versus its sabotage; the “subversion” that our title references is an operation that happens within form itself, an inherent tendency to go astray even as it organizes a text in essential ways.

Eyers nicely encapsulates the “shared incompleteness” that structures both literary and political forms; he explains, “the resonance of world and word is to be found in the *non-mimetic*, *non-correlational* but nonetheless *shared* moments of incompleteness that define text and materiality, literature and history.”<sup>47</sup> We can access these moments, Eyers argues, when we recognize literary form “as possessing its own speculative capacity to partially bend and refigure its various determinants.”<sup>48</sup> Or, as Cole puts it, artistic figuration comes to the rescue when concepts fail – “figures get concepts unstuck.”<sup>49</sup> Literature, via figuration, can express what might otherwise be inexpressible in a given cultural context – not because of censorship or ignorance, but because art creates access to the unarticulated aspects of culture, and can also create new, as yet unthought articulations. Artistic creation has the capacity to enter the dialectic just at the moment of conceptual failure, offering a simultaneously optimistic and pessimistic vision of the relationship between literature and history. Literature is closely bound up with failure and error, but also has the potential to move beyond that failure.<sup>50</sup> The art work does not simply offer a material, particular instance of a universal idea or concept, but exposes the difficult relationship between the two.<sup>51</sup>

An emphasis on the failures or contradictions intrinsic to form has been strikingly articulated by scholars working at the intersection between new formalism and medieval manuscript studies. In the introduction to Arthur Bahr and Alexandra Gillespie’s special issue of *The Chaucer Review* on form and manuscripts, they explain that, in books, form does more than “effect meaning,” as D. F. McKenzie’s influential formulation has it.<sup>52</sup> For Bahr and Gillespie, the forms of medieval books always “suggest, illuminate, defy, resist, augment, make, and unmake meaning as well.”<sup>53</sup> In the issue itself, Jessica Brantley notes that both New Criticism and textual materialism have taught us that form shapes meaning, and yet she is most interested to search out where forms fail to effect this shaping.<sup>54</sup> She explores the range of possible meanings for the use of tail rhyme as a form, concluding that “the horizon of expectations established by this form is so broad and varied that it almost ceases to exist.”<sup>55</sup> Sometimes attention to form can frustrate rather than enable the revelation of meaning – and the frustration itself may be revelatory. In the same volume, D. Vance Smith asks if the privileging of