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Introduction: medieval English culture and its companions

This "companion" is designed to introduce a range of materials deemed to constitute the culture (or, perhaps better, cultures) of medieval England, from approximately the Norman Conquest to roughly the Reformation. The fields presented here may offer a rather unusual fit with standard courses and disciplines, but the pressures on modern frameworks are intended. It is not unusual, however, for study of early periods to offer some combination of "literature," "history," "archaeology," "art history," or other fields. Studies in antiquity and the Renaissance do this regularly, and medieval studies from the outset was defined in an equally capacious framework. Partly this is because times more distant from our world make obvious the need for a more varied set of tools yet more synthetic angle of view. To be sure, the history of scholarship shows that studies in particular disciplines need the context of their own conversations, debates, and long-cultivated tools and strategies. But scholarly history also suggests that work in particular fields flourishes in an environment of other pursuits in the same period. Scholars and students in any one field need the companionship of others pursuing related kinds of work, to broaden perspectives and inspire new ways of carrying out particular endeavors, and to advance our understanding of how issues and materials that we treat separately were in their own period related.

A portable guide with such goals can only introduce and provoke, aiming for a significant variety of approaches, as well as a significant range of disciplines. The fields treated here include political and legal history, archaeology, social history, art history, religion, history of education, and, especially, the literatures of medieval England: Latin, French, and English. A general chronological sequence is followed

but not rigorously divided; some chapters stress linear chronological developments, others center on issues or case studies. Their territories cannot and should not be simply merged with one another, and the goal of the overall arrangement is to suggest complex relationships – and the potential for further combinations of these fields – as well as set forth some new or reconsidered foundations for particular disciplines from the distinct points of view of a notable range of scholars.

The word "culture" – charged and laden as it is with its own history – is meant to help these pursuits, but as a challenge rather than a notion of some stable or unifying thing, which it can never be. "Culture," in Raymond Williams' view, is "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language."[1] The term is a key that at best opens many locks, and its use in the title is intended to incite thought about ways of situating and connecting the fields surveyed in this volume (and others that are not). Williams mentions two senses of the word that are relevant. The older, but still available, sense of "culture" (and *Kultur*, *Cultur*, etc.) coined and developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries refers to aesthetic, intellectual, political, and spiritual development or cultivation. This sense governs, for instance, Jacob Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (the English translation of Burckhardt's 1860 *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien*), a work foundational for the flexible and broad-ranging inquiry approach that we now consider "cultural history."[2] That meaning of *Cultur* – as "civilization" or "high culture" – carries an elite implication, conveying a particular threshold of social prestige in training or cultivation. Paradoxically (given its use as an index to very specific worlds and times), that sense can also purport to embody values that are transcultural and transhistorical, the "best" standards by which every artistic and social sphere or form should be measured. To avoid this, historical perspective is particularly important (as Burckhardt realized more than he is sometimes given credit for). In Burckhardt's presentation, those values were especially linked to distinctive individualism, as expressed in art, politics, and learning, and epitomized by a particular range of canonical forms of communication and particular (invariably monumentalized) artists and intellectuals. Other standards than individualism, of course, have sometimes prevailed in scholarly uses of the term. In any case, this sense of the word still refers to things of distinctive social value: "honor, morals, religion, and the law," as a scholar puts it in a recent volume on "the transmission of culture in early Modern Europe."[3]

A second and broader sense for the word has, however, overtaken the first in many uses today. This comprehensive if not all-inclusive meaning of the word "culture" insists on historical and circumstantial differences of values and meanings. This sense, emerging from anthropology, has touched all historical and literary studies. In this usage, "culture" refers to a materially and socially comprehensive range of human life, including kinship systems, trade patterns, structures of society and social power, and habits or modes of material production. People may strive to be "cultured" in the narrower, elite sense, but in the broader sense they are always already "cultured" – if, that is, they are to be even conceivable as members of the same world. These are the terms that the twentieth-century scholar and poet John Holloway invokes when he muses on his London childhood world and family of the 1920s and 1930s: "What – limited as we admittedly were – could we do? What did we know? What, perhaps one could ask, was our culture? By this I do not mean intellectual culture as I was later to know it, because of that we had none." Instead, Holloway shows that he means the "culture" made up of nursery rhymes, proverbs, holiday rituals, weather-lore, the small skills of making things, and imagining (or not) the prospects of social advancement and even the apocalyptic and religious end of the world. Some of the most difficult parts for him to see were the smallest ones. Confessing to the difficulty of capturing this range about a world that he himself inhabited, Holloway notes, "It is really quite difficult to unearth one's trivial skills. They feel almost like breathing, not part of a learned culture, and of course this whole account is very incomplete."[4]

There can be no doubt that, for much of the twentieth century, this sense of "culture" has been a productive strategy for connecting diverse fields. Currents of anthropological thought flowing into and, in turn, back out from literary and historical study represent perhaps the most important "trans-disciplinary" influence in the humanities. Highly influential has been anthropological work on the role of "games" and "deep play" in culture, often taking as a starting point Clifford Geertz's work.[5] Literary and historical scholars have both long drawn from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose concepts of "*habitus*," "symbolic capital," and the uses of language to deploy or manipulate social power extend the still important and stimulating work of Bronislaw Malinowski and others (though Bourdieu, opposing Malinowski, was opposed to a narrowly "functionalist" approach to the symbolic means of social life).[6] For Bourdieu, the general indoctrination of attitudes and "rules" supposedly defining social life mask the constant manipulations of such codes; thus, "culture" is no static system

but instead unfolds from negotiations between the "symbolic" and material economies, in a *habitus* or dynamic system of values whose silences – the unspeakable or unthinkable – are as crucial yet as seemingly "natural" as those Holloway ponders. In these terms, scholarship has continued to extend "cultural" explanations across ever wider tracts of human life, including emotional, bodily, and even neurological features of human existence.

Yet at the same time, precise and sensitive pursuit of aesthetic issues is more important than ever. Literature's and art's formal properties are always at the center of pursuits by literary and art historians, and sometimes anthropologists as well. For those scholars, those properties provide the very reason to explore culture in any broader sense. There can be no full *a priori* or deductive account of a narrative or visual work: one must start inductively and by focused consideration, choosing contexts from the inside out, and only by following these strands can a larger picture emerge. Yet again, as Malinowski and other anthropologists remind us, there can be no meaning without context and use. The pursuit of both artistic and wider cultural history must go hand in hand.

Such theorizing is stimulating, but any historical and literary inquiry must treat particular conditions, traditions, and artifacts rather than general theories. Ideas of "culture" of any kind can dull as well as sharpen thought, and to carry out the latter, our suppositions and terms must be continually subjected to scrutiny. An example pertinent to this book might be the notion of "Anglo-Norman culture." Such a "culture" must be said to begin with the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, where this volume takes its general (though not categorical or impermeable) point of origin. That is a logical as well as a practical starting point. From the eleventh century on, Europe's political and intellectual life was transformed, with more widely connected interactions of thought, institutions, and goods, many more written vernacular literatures, and equally distinctive new political systems and emergent bureaucracies. Written French, German, Icelandic, and Italian literary traditions all take their start at this period, and English and Latin literatures both take new starts. A new range of diverse and interacting literary and other written materials emerges into view.

At the same time, however, Anglo-Saxon England did not simply cease to exist at the Conquest, though it was reframed, both as (to use Charles Taylor's term) a new "social imaginary," and in political, literary, and social realities.[7] As Elaine Treharne's chapter reminds us, much of what we identify as "Anglo-Saxon" prose is extant in copies from the century after the Conquest. Moreover, the Continental Norman culture

that preceded the Norman Conquest of England possessed a range of political and ideological elements crucial not only for understanding what happened after the English Conquest, but also for how that Conquest and the spread of Norman rule elsewhere in eleventh- and twelfth-century Europe came to be. If one were to use "Anglo-Norman" as the main framework to define post-Conquest England, one ought to consider both the pre-Norman English culture, and the cultures of the Normans wherever those had already developed.

One might also want to consider whose views were being represented. Certainly, to many of those whose lands they conquered or threatened, the Normans seemed to possess a trademark style, if only of intimidation and exploitation. As the twelfth-century chronicler at Peterborough Abbey, last continuer of a tradition of writing in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, declared, in a unique English poetic epitaph to William the Conqueror, "Castelas he let wyrcean/and earme men swiðe swencean" ("He caused castles to be built/and wretched men oppressed").[8] The chronicler's judgment of William is mixed, but the perspective shows the beginning of the steady shift of English writers to that of outsiders to the new regime (with its new architecture and new patrons). Yet literary forms are already being mixed, and boundaries of those features of separate "cultures" blurred: the Peterborough chronicler's own verses on the Conqueror abandon the traditional alliterative style of Old English poetry, and instead use the form of rhyme that the Normans' French poetry thereafter influentially made available: "wyrcean … swencean."

Capturing the *images* of other cultures, indeed, is as crucial to our understanding as determining any "real" boundaries or entities. As David Dumville's chapter here on Celtic (or, as Dumville pointedly insists, "celtic") visions of the English shows, past visions of a dominant or a subordinate "culture" open up the question of how valid any sweeping claim about a "culture" may be. Not that such visions of "cultures" are less real or not elements of history in themselves: they have their own meanings and traditions, passed down and among various historical communities. But modern scholarship should use such terms carefully, lest they replicate the social visions that the histories of such notions carry with them (what Bourdieu calls "complicit" analysis). The image of a struggle between "Anglo-Norman" and "English" literature and culture, for instance, has long lingered in medieval English literary history. It is fair to assume, as most scholars do, for instance, that the tradition of poetic English

writing that we think of as "classical Old English" poetry retreated well before the Conquest, leaving a much less ascertainable range of forms and traditions that depended on French forms, apart from such novel poetic alliterative styles as that in Layamon's early thirteenth-century *Brut* – eventually followed by the "triumph of English" with Chaucer and his contemporaries and followers. But this literary historical narrative of enslavement and liberation – which is also a cultural narrative, sometimes involving claims about a "true national spirit" – is too fully wrapped up in nineteenth-century ideas of nationalism to be believable as a complete guide to linguistic, much less to literary, intellectual, or (proto-) national culture. Just as Old English did not cease to be read and written for at least two generations after the Conquest, so the late-medieval alliterative "revival" developed from its own, highly Francophone contexts. True, the alliterative forms of Old English poetry, and even more the rhythmic forms of Old English homiletic prose, may have survived strongly enough to have shaped the finely (but quite differently) crafted alliterative English poetry that appears as if out of nowhere in the later fourteenth century, in works such as *Pearl*, *Sir Gawain*, *Piers Plowman*, and others. Yet those works were profoundly formed by the French literature that had developed in the meantime, in England and on the Continent, to which those works often directly responded and around which they were closely shaped.

As well as wondering what kinds of continuity really existed in such a sudden resurgence of a long-buried vernacular literary style, we should also ask what gains we seek by thinking – as scholars from the seventeenth century on have, as Clare Simmons notes in her chapter – of a distinct "Anglo-Norman culture" or even a "Norman yoke" that was somehow in continual struggle against and contradistinction to those "true English" traditions. Part of the answer is that this division between "Anglo-Norman" and "English" cultures and languages serves to bolster a modern sense of the antiquity of English national and cultural identity. But the English-only linguistic nature of that is a much more recent invention, and a misleading one. It is easy to think, for instance, that in the late fourteenth century, Chaucer both exemplified by his successful production, and asserted by his various comments, that the French world of Anglo-Norman culture was by his period of the late fourteenth century a lost cause, an elite game preserve. We might be tempted to think this because he was and still is often seen to "found" English literature; or simply by the deft and withering irony to which he subjects a prioress

who regularly speaks French but of the "scole of Stratford atte Bowe,/For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe."[9] But the narrator's slyly patronizing ear belongs to someone who, unlike the prioress, discerns the "Frenssh of Parys" as different from the insular varieties, even the kinds from religious houses like Stratford atte Bowe of which she speaks so consummately. There is no "triumph of English" or death of French culture in England in this quietly satiric moment. On the contrary, this is a reminder that "Frenssh of Parys" was still a reference point for what Chaucer might, if he knew our terms, have earnestly called "culture" in the Burckhardtian sense.

This is also a reminder of the further late medieval social ideal of knowing many possible kinds and styles of speech, and having the ability to use them as occasion (including glancing satire) demanded, as opposed to those who could only excel at the provincial versions of such styles. The French of English varieties remained a frequent language of the English court, but at least some at that court had a continental ear and frame of reference as well (as the continental French style of Chaucer's associate John Gower shows well). The prioress has missed this crucial point, though she is said to take special pains "to countrefete cheere/Of court, and to been estatlich of manere" (lines 139–40). Immaculately careful but lacking a sense of "Frenssh of Parys," she will always be slightly less cultured than she thinks, a speaker instead of the kind of French that flourished in religious houses, rather than the kind of French that continued to be read in the deluxe copies of the *Roman de la Rose* and other continental French works that the nobility owned into the fifteenth century. So, too, other forms of "business" French persisted, as some records indicate, until the seventeenth century in England on the manors of the provincial nobility.[10] Hearing the social meanings in these differences is much harder for us than grasping the linguistic elements.[11] So fully is the *idea* of higher Parisian French "culture" (in the elite sense) assimilated into later medieval English literature that language as such is not the point. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the elegant dinner conversation presented in alliterative English between the Cheshire household and Sir Gawain is called "frenkysh fare," a very high standard indeed (line 1116).

Our pursuit of culture must thus include the specters and images of culture – in every sense – from the period in question. As David Lawton's chapter makes clear, the *desire* in literary "voices" to constitute something other and more monumental than they really did is as

much part of our object of inquiry as the empirical evidence of what languages were used (or abused), what texts actually made, what buildings actually built. As both Bourdieu the anthropologist and Holloway the poet stress, cultural history has to work both inside and outside its sources, and draw both critical awareness and historical sympathy wherever it can find it – be that in anthropology or in study of manorial records, or literary satire.

This volume begins with three essays that set the stage for the period and for the broad terms of life: political, legal, and material. The three chapters in this section stress the complexities of the boundaries between their disciplines even as they clearly indicate their outlines and riches. Scott Waugh opens with a magisterial overview of how politics at court and beyond developed in post-Conquest England. Here, the local as well as the wider social pressures on the royal power are interwoven. The same chronological starting point is used to frame Paul Hyams' detailed discussion of a very different social level, where literature and legal procedures mutually illuminate the transformations of culture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, marking the beginning of a lawyer-dominated world. As David Hinton's chapter on archaeology shows, further glimpses of everyday values, as well as the basis of literary meanings, are even more pervasively if sometimes elusively provided by the material evidence of life. Hinton's chapter pursues a range of social experience that moves smoothly between the high and the low senses of culture, and especially seeks to understand the undocumented creativity and endeavors of the mass of unlettered and rarely described common people.

Although all three opening chapters present broad settings indeed, all of them also make clear the importance of the local and the immediate. Waugh's study shows how highly particular patronage and intensely personal political strife shaped broader political history. Hyams' chapter suggests that maxims learned in childhood define one's outlook on law, wrong, and justice. Hinton's chapter reminds us that how people framed their houses depended on their region – although in this case, just what defined that particular regional boundary, as he shows, remains mysterious. Geography and region always matter, and much culture is local. Recent work has shown how regional studies, in fact, offer particularly rich opportunities for showing how several different kinds of "culture,"

rather than literature or society or art as such, must be considered as a
unit and at the same time.

Other frameworks for social life than time or place allow us to pursue
more widely shared views and concerns. The second section, therefore,
considers a range of kinds and views of social relations – narrative or
symbolic as well as lived – and the values and anxieties involved in those.
This section is concerned with ideals and conflicts, while the focus moves
forward somewhat in chronology. As Richard Kaeuper indicates in his
chapter in this section, something like the beginnings of the idea of "the
nation" are visible in Anglo-Saxon England, but the Norman Conquest
imposed new forms of that notion, supported by new institutions for
justice. Yet in a further development of that view, and continuing his
consideration to the later centuries of the Middle Ages, Kaeuper makes
the case that the later centuries reveal a real decline in public confidence
in legal processes, a pervading sense of partisan interests, and a lack of
credibility in the efforts by the powerful to serve the "common" good –
an idea that emerged just as its fulfillment seemed unavailable. This is
a question not only of chronological divisions in a culture, but of trans-
formation of its broad assumptions about public institutions and key
terms of experience and understanding.

No less complex and controversial are the assessments of how English
medieval culture after the Conquest spread its values, and bigotries,
into the neighboring islands and regions: modern Ireland, Wales, and
Scotland, especially during the thirteenth-century expansion that has
been called by the historian R. R. Davies "England's first empire." As
Davies points out, "English advance was ultimately sustainable in depth
and over a long period only in conditions which were sufficiently attrac-
tive for intensive colonization and for the replication of conditions in
which an English-type society and economy could flourish" – areas with
somewhat similar preexisting social and economic features (such as parts
of Scotland), or areas that could keep themselves intact and discrete from
clearly segregated pockets of colonial English power and control (like
Wales and Ireland). Beyond those areas, Davies suggests, assimilation
into Wales, Scotland, and Ireland of English ways of life and authority
was not likely or even imagined. "The incompatibilities of economic
power, social custom, and political norms were simply too great."[12] Yet
as a literary scholar, Michelle Warren, shows, a particularly rich and
complex range of historical writing and literature about cultural author-
ity – focused on the endlessly pervasive stories of King Arthur – emerges

from these "borders of Britain."[13] These views may serve as general background to David Dumville's chapter in the present volume on "celtic" visions of England, which suggest that the incompatibilities were not simply material and political, but also stubbornly ideological. Images of the "Other" persisted and grew on both sides of the boundaries between England and its closest neighbors, and to some extent still govern social vision today. The question of values leads back to the question of whose values, and even whose values those are perceived to be, by others. As Dumville shows, the house of culture's mirrors can be complex.

Fundamental to medieval values is the desire for sanctity, and, indeed, the pull of religion as a whole is an unavoidably major element of medieval culture. Thus, closing the second section, Rebecca Krug provocatively charts both the desire for sanctity and some of the extra-ordinary deflections and survivals of it by way of the early fifteenth-century figure and (presumed) writer, Margery Kempe. The scale of the context in which Krug ultimately positions Margery is very large indeed. For Krug, *The Book of Margery Kempe* serves as a focus for the long history of the desire for sanctity in terms that occupy as broad a horizon for "culture" as Christianity itself.

Values lead logically to kinds of knowledge and literature and art, and these "literacies" are discussed in this volume's third section. Opening this section, the elucidation of the "textual" articulateness of visual art that Laura Kendrick's chapter surveys brings directly to the fore the issue of how to rejoin into a more meaningful unity the visual and the textual that are usually separated in modern scholarship. Seeing with "medieval eyes" is, as Kendrick shows, somewhat possible, with the right strategies, but it involves other assumptions than those we customarily make about the visual *and* the textual. So, too, as Ralph Hanna's following account of medieval schooling shows, the modes of medieval grammar education are unfamiliar to most of us. Such schooling was nonetheless central in inculcating participants into a range of complex levels of understanding and social discipline, and even in sensory training (by the ear rather than the eye). These are the unarticulated matters of schooling, the parts of learnedness as unnoticeable as breathing. The combinations of French and English that Elaine Treharne treats in her chapter – a key to any view of "Anglo-Norman" culture – offer another challenge to our common views: the basic assumptions of a single-language world, education, and literary production. Treharne offers that challenge through the most immediate kind of material encounter we still possess to access medieval