# *Introduction*

The present study investigates the reception of late medieval literary texts, exploring and interpreting the evidence that reveals how they were read, by whom, and when. Its particular focus is a group of fifteenth-century manuscripts owned by a single English family in the sixteenth century. The twenty or so individual works contained within these eight manuscripts are largely, though not entirely, of a devotional nature, and so a special point of interest is the apparent disjunction between the contents of these texts, the products of a wholly Catholic age, and the considerably more complex religious environment in which their sixteenth-century readers found themselves, especially after the 1530s. More generally attention is paid to the various ways in which these early modern readers used their old medieval books – as a repository for family records; as a place where other texts of a favourite or important nature might be inscribed; as a source of practical information when preparing household remedies; and as a professional manual for the practising lawyer. All of these activities indicate that these manuscripts enjoyed a great deal of use in the sixteenth century, despite being much older than their owners. These manuscripts were not yet collectors' items, to be valued for their antique or rare nature rather than for their contents, and to be kept carefully, as curiosities; instead they were still treated as sources of reading material and stores of knowledge. Despite the inexorable rise of the printed book following the introduction of printing in England and a flood of imported books from the Continent, in the sixteenth century the manuscript remained a viable and desirable format in which to encounter the written word.

In general much more attention has been devoted to uncovering information about the production of medieval manuscripts than to considering how they and their textual contents may have been used. This has been especially true in recent years due to significant advances in the study of medieval scribes and their outputs. The idea that professional scribes, such as those employed at the chancery, might have been responsible for producing non-official works by moonlighting had long been mooted, but the identification of particular instances where this actually happened has emerged only recently. The rewards of looking in other places for the scribes who wrote literary texts were demonstrated by Carter Revard, whose detailed researches amongst documents localizable to early fourteenth-century Ludlow uncovered a much fuller picture of the work of the main scribe of the important trilingual miscellany, BL MS Harley 2253. This scribe, though still nameless, is now known to have been responsible for three manuscripts and forty-one legal writs, with the latter documents furnishing a profile of a man who flourished as a professional legal scribe in the Ludlow area from at least December 1314 to April 1349.[1] In short, we now know a lot more about the scribe of the Harley lyrics than we did before. Linne Mooney has followed a similar approach in the context of late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century London and has argued that clerks who held major bureaucratic offices at the Guildhall were the copyists of some of the earliest manuscripts of works by Middle English authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, and William Langland.[2]

Even before these great steps forward in understanding patterns of late medieval scribal activity, more scholarly attention had always been directed towards the matter of manuscript production, as opposed to reception, perhaps because aspects of manuscript production are more naturally aligned with the business of textual criticism. Traditional methodologies of editing that sought to draw up a family tree for the existing witnesses of a text, and to establish a line of textual descent that could point the way back to their single common ancestor or 'Ur-text', relied on a particular aspect of production – scribal errors – as their guiding light. Close attention to shared textual errors could reveal affinities between existing witnesses and could also help the editor to recover the text's original readings. This emphasis on determining the original form of a text (and sometimes thereby identifying its author) linked naturally to an interest in any evidence as to where a text had been copied, and by whom, and at whose request. The publication of *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* raised hopes that the locations where later Middle English texts had

[1] Revard, 'Scribe and Provenance', and see further the discussion by Fein, 'Literary Scribes'.
[2] See Mooney and Stubbs, *Scribes and the City*.

been copied could be determined; in fact this was never what its editors had promised, but the 'fit' technique did at least help to reveal where the scribes themselves had come from in linguistic terms. Following the principle that apples do not fall very far from the tree, this offered a useful advance in knowledge about manuscript production.[3] Matters of reception have generally been discussed less materially and in ways which focus on individual texts: in the tracing of the influence of one text on another; in charting the use of sources; and in the spread of ideas and philosophies. These are profitable lines of enquiry because medieval literature was deeply engaged in the matter of citation and allusion. As dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, contemporary authors sought to situate themselves within an authoritative tradition of writing by quoting and acknowledging greater writers who had preceded them, and identifying such influences is part of the work of the modern editor. Yet all of this relates more to where a text or texts *came from*, and rather less to where texts *went to* once they had been authored and copied; still less interest has been shown in the matter of identifying who actually read them. In fact the format of the critical edition leaves little scope for a full discussion of matters relating to either production or reception. The extended introduction that traditionally prefaces the edited text usually describes in detail only the manuscript which has been selected to form the base text of the edition. The characteristics of its scribal hand are described, and more information given about the scribe and any other manuscripts associated with him, but in this framework there is room to accommodate only fairly minimal discussion. Names of owners and a sketch of manuscript provenance typically appear in this section, but evidence of marginalia and the operation of later hands within the manuscript will be mentioned, if at all, in the notes to the text, where there is no opportunity for an extensive analysis of these characteristics of readerly engagement, textual reception, and the material use of the book.

An important overview of book production and reception is offered by the third volume of *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, and no fewer than fifteen essays are marshalled under the heading 'Reading and Use of Books'.[4] Most of the contributions here seek to place emphasis on identifying overall trends, and usage is organized into broad groups (scholars, professionals, and

[3] McIntosh, Samuels, and Benskin, *LALME*, I.23–28; for a critique of its methodology see Burton, 'On the Current State of Middle English Dialectology', and the response by Benskin, 'In Reply to Dr Burton'.

[4] Hellinga and Trapp (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, III: 1400–1557*.

lay readers), which means that the discussions are necessarily light in detail, and cannot pay much attention to examining the practice of individual readers. A more recent volume of essays published in 2011, *The Production of Books in England 1350–1500*, surveyed existing scholarship on later medieval manuscript production with individual essays by a range of contributors offering sustained focus on the different elements and phases of production required to produce the manuscript book.[5] The collection sought to build upon the work of an earlier and extremely influential volume of essays in the same subject field, *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375–1475* published in 1989, aiming to update the positions taken there and to augment the findings of its contributors.[6] Yet one major difference between the two essay collections is that whilst the earlier volume covered both production and reception, the latter focusses exclusively on production. In the 1989 collection seven of the fifteen essays discussed texts and their reception, with four of these included under the heading 'Patrons, Buyers and Owners', and several of the essays that examined production were predominantly interested in content rather than the process of assembly. Conversely in the 2011 collection seven of the thirteen chapters treat aspects of the production process in considerable detail, and the emphasis of the whole collection is firmly fixed on the methods, circumstances, and economy of manuscript production. There is no equivalent amongst the essays of the later volume to the detailed investigations into the users of books made by Kate Harris and Carol Meale in the earlier collection. This seems like a surprising omission since, after general advances in the subject over a period of more than two decades, there is surely more to say about the reception and use of medieval manuscripts. Given the continued work of many scholars including, to name only a few, Julia Boffey, Mary Erler, Ann Hutchison, Carol Meale, and Anne Sutton, and the perennial interest in the ownership and readership of manuscripts evident from ongoing publications in journals such as the *Journal of the Early Book Society, The Library*, and *The Book Collector*, a companion volume to *The Production of Books in England* that focussed instead on book *reception* might justifiably be imagined. Indeed, the editors Alexandra Gillespie and Daniel Wakelin do note that although the use of books is not the focus of the essays they present, 'the collection points up the importance of readers, libraries and provenance study', yet to date no equivalent collective study of

5 Gillespie and Wakelin (eds.), *The Production of Books in England 1350–1500*.
6 Griffiths and Pearsall (eds.), *Book Production and Publishing in Britain*.

manuscript reception has been undertaken.[7] Further, Ralph Hanna has characterized this field of study as 'fragmented', observing that the main outlet for codicological work remains the article rather than the monograph.[8]

In splitting the codicological treatment of manuscripts into the separate fields of production and reception, there is a danger of forcing an artificial division upon the subject, since the two processes are inextricably linked; to focus too narrowly on one aspect or the other is to risk distorting and misinterpreting the true picture. The first readers of a text were also the scribes who copied it, meaning that every act of production was simultaneously an act of reception. The ways in which a text may be received cannot be controlled by its author, and to depend solely on reader responses is also to depend on evidence which is likely to be both incomplete and unreliable. As Raluca Radulescu has observed, the issues of production and reception are inseparable in that 'the unravelling of the back-processes of book production, and then the forward-processes . . . of circulation and consumption' constitute significant stages in scholarly attempts to understand medieval texts.[9] The codicologist must therefore be Janus-like, and also able to piece together very different types of evidence. In practice, as the comments of Gillespie and Wakelin acknowledge, studies of manuscript production find it hard to ignore entirely evidence that relates to readership and ownership; similarly, a study primarily focussed on reception will not want to disregard interesting aspects of the production process that reveal themselves during the course of detailed examination. Accordingly, the present study will on occasion draw attention to features that relate to production, notwithstanding its primary concern with the afterlife of the texts and manuscripts that are its subject.

The paucity of similarly extended studies of the reception of medieval texts is undoubtedly linked to the sheer difficulty involved in this type of research. The evidence for the use of books, and for the reading of the texts within them, is hard to uncover, define, and interpret; sometimes, indeed, there may be little evidence to find.[10] The medieval manuscript is an object that carries information about its own production in its very fabric, on every leaf, and in every written letter; this is true of all manuscripts, but the same is not true in terms of

[7] Gillespie and Wakelin (eds.), *The Production of Books in England 1350–1500*, p. 11.
[8] Hanna, 'Analytical Survey', p. 245.
[9] Connolly and Radulescu (eds.), *Insular Books*, p. 16.
[10] For an articulation of some of these challenges see Boffey, 'Reading in London in 1501', pp. 51–61.

reception. Manuscripts may survive in pristine condition, left clean and unmarked by their well-behaved consumers, so we cannot rely on finding evidence of reception in every manuscript in the same way that we can be certain that there will be evidence of production. Evidence of reception, in codicological terms, consists of signs of ownership, marginal or other annotation, and damage. Inscribed names in margins and on endleaves do not necessarily constitute proof of ownership; they do, however, usually indicate some form of contact between book and user. Signs of ownership, which might include the inscription of names, owners' marks or book stamps, and library pressmarks, denote possession and sometimes location. Yet possession does not necessarily imply readership: we all have books that we own but have never read. Library books in particular may have been physically present in a collection or a community, but it is not easy to know which members of that community (if any), and at what times, actually borrowed or read the book, or what proportion of a book they may have read (or how they read it – from cover to cover, or more selectively – and with what attention).[11] Damage such as accumulated dirt or wear from rubbing or kissing can reveal much about the use of particular parts of a manuscript, and may often lead to insights into practices and rituals in which the book played a role (in devotional contexts, for example), as the recent work of Kate Rudy has shown, but such damage cannot show who handled the book.[12] Even annotation, the seam of gold that every researcher interested in reception wishes to discover, is not an unproblematic area. For a start the scripts used for the addition of comments and other reader responses are liable to be less practised, more casual, and thus hard to decipher. Such additions had to be fitted into whatever blank space was available, usually in the margins of a text, in the gutter, and in the spaces between lines; this paucity of writing space often led to the squashing, compressing, and abbreviating of comments. Material added to the margins was also liable to be partially lost to trimming if a manuscript was rebound, or – before the present day – removed by chemical substances in efforts to clean up the volume's appearance. Furthermore, annotations tend to present themselves in a jumble, having often been made over time, by different readers, or by a single reader on successive occasions. This may be apparent from the presence

[11] Though a great deal more is now known about the contents of medieval libraries through the publication of successive volumes in the Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues series.

[12] Rudy, 'Dirty Books'.

of different scripts and different hues of ink within the leaves of the same manuscript, with some sections more copiously annotated than others. Such layers of annotation are very hard to disentangle and to interpret. Even harder to deal with are various other non-verbal types of additions to the text such as underlining or the addition of pointing hands (manicules) in the margins. Whilst the immediate purpose of such additions in drawing attention to a particular section of the text is clear, attributing such markings to any particular reader may be difficult, unless the overall evidence is very coherent (for example, in a manuscript where only one reader using the same type of ink seems to have been active). If such marks appear on their own, without other surrounding comments, or without the helpful context of a known owner or at least a known era of use, they may prove impossible to interpret further, since in the absence of other evidence how can we possibly tell who underlined a text or when this took place? (The 'why' may be easier to work out.) Assembling a narrative of reception can thus involve skating out over thin ice. There is a rich corpus of evidence here, but one which is challenging to interpret, and assembling that material into a coherent scholarly argument is another challenge altogether.

Another reason that the reception of medieval texts and manuscripts has received less attention than it deserves is that a large part of the evidence for reception tends to be post-medieval in date, and so does not fall within the main purview of the medievalists who edit and criticize the texts. Here we meet a stubborn division in the subject between the medieval period and the Renaissance. There is a wealth of evidence for the reception of medieval texts in the sixteenth century which has largely been ignored, or at least not thoroughly investigated, because specialists in late medieval literature tend to be reluctant to venture forwards, either because they do not feel confident in dealing with a later historical context, or because they are unable to read sixteenth-century secretary script. This is not to suggest that there has been no attention at all to this area. The sixteenth-century afterlife of *Piers Plowman* in particular has attracted considerable interest, with studies of owners and readers of individual manuscripts and of the annotations in early printed copies.[13] This has forced a reassessment of the poem's doctrinal appeal in this

[13] See Schaap, 'From Professional to Private Readership'; Horobin, 'Stephan Batman and His Manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*'; Kelen, *Langland's Early Modern Identities*; Griffiths, 'Editorial Glossing and Reader Resistance'.

period, as evidence has emerged of the continued existence of a Catholic *Piers Plowman* alongside the Protestant Piers believed to be beloved by reformists.[14] Research on Chaucer's manuscripts remains preoccupied with issues of scribal production and the establishment of the poet's reputation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but there has been some investigation of readers' annotations in printed copies of Chaucer's poetry, and a recent study of John Walton's translation of *De Consolatione Philosophiae* analyses how it was read in both manuscript and printed form.[15] By and large these studies have been conducted by medievalists since sixteenth-century specialists are not generally interested in the medieval texts that are at the root of this issue, preferring instead to concentrate on works written in their own period of interest. Yet knowing what texts were read, and having a good sense of what texts were available for reading at any given point, is important not least because reading has a potential influence on writing, and Tudor cultural dependence on medieval literary texts is generally acknowledged.[16] Dates of publication (routinely available post-printing) only tell us when something was produced; when that work was read, and widely read, and became influential, is a more fluid, shadowy phenomenon that cannot be easily dated beyond its starting point. Books, once written, remain in circulation, and might influence thinking and opinion long after their own day might be thought to have ended.

It is also rare to be able to identify a suitable corpus of evidence that will support a sustained interpretation. The late medieval manuscripts collected and annotated by John Stow, along with his own works and handwritten copies, constitute a body of material that would repay more detailed investigation than it has yet received, but Stow's cramped handwriting is a major deterrent to would-be researchers.[17] There are the major sixteenth- and seventeenth-century collections assembled by men such as Matthew Parker (1504–75) and Robert Cotton (1571–1631), but in these cases there are the problems of scale and scope, with too much material to assimilate adequately, and where in any case it is clear that we are dealing with bibliophiles whose main interests lay in gathering

[14] Warner, *The Myth of Piers Plowman*, Chapter 4 (especially pp. 84–86).

[15] Wiggins, 'What Did Renaissance Readers Write in their Printed Copies of Chaucer?'; Edwards, 'Reading John Walton's Boethius in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries'.

[16] For a recent and wide-ranging account of this influence see Kelen (ed.), *Renaissance Retrospections*.

[17] Useful insights into Stow's importance are offered by the essays in Gadd and Gillespie (eds.), *John Stow*.

significant numbers of books rather than purely in reading.[18] At the other end of the spectrum a more typical situation involves the single manuscript and a handful of inscribed names. Sometimes it is not possible to make much of those names, as for example in the case of the Auchinleck manuscript, the famous fourteenth-century collection of English verse romances and other texts, which has amongst its leaves many inscribed names, none of which has ever been identified.[19] And even when historical candidates can be more or less certainly identified as the makers of inscriptions there may simply not be enough recoverable biographical information to supply a robust context. High-status owners such as royal or aristocratic figures and their books have been better documented not just because of a historic tendency to value such figures more highly, but because their lives are more fully recorded and their reading easier to contextualize. Royal owners whose books have been much investigated include Richard III and Henry VIII.[20] The literate activities of upper-class secular women such as Margaret of York, Duchess of Burgundy, and Lady Margaret Beaufort have also received attention.[21] Amongst the ranks of professed female religious the community of nuns at Syon has attracted the most scholarly interest.[22] Lower down the social scale there have been some collective studies of reading communities, particularly female networks of book ownership and traffic, and especially involving urban mercantile classes.[23] A rare full-length individual study of a single female owner and her manuscript is Alexandra Barratt's account of Anne Bulkeley.[24] Most attention has been given to personal notebooks or miscellanies, especially those connected with owner-reader-producers such as Robert Thornton, Robert Reynes, Humphrey Newton, and John Hanson.[25] An alternative approach, focussing on text-type

[18] For studies of Cotton and his collections see Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, and Wright, *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector*.

[19] Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates' 19.2.1.

[20] See Sutton and Visser-Fuchs, *The Hours of Richard III* and *Richard III's Books*, and Carley, *The Libraries of Henry VIII*.

[21] Weightman, *Margaret of York, Duchess of Burgundy*, especially pp. 204–13; Jones and Underwood, *The King's Mother*, especially pp. 171–201.

[22] de Hamel, *Syon Abbey*, and Jones and Walsham (eds.), *Syon Abbey and its Books*.

[23] Meale, ' . . . alle the bokes that I haue'; Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety*; Boffey, 'Some London Women Readers'.

[24] Barratt, *Anne Bulkeley and her Book*.

[25] See Fein, 'Literary Scribes'; Meale, 'Amateur Book Production'; Youngs, *Humphrey Newton (1466–1536)*; May and Marotti, *Ink, Stink Bait, Revenge, and Queen Elizabeth*.

rather than book owner, is that taken by Eamon Duffy in his study of the use of books of hours and prayer-books in England in the late medieval and early modern periods; one of these books of hours, Cambridge University Library, MS Ii.6.2, is examined afresh and in greater detail in the present volume.[26] And a recent collection of essays edited by Mary Flannery and Carrie Griffin that considers where and how reading took place in later medieval England interprets that chronological era generously and includes contributions that investigate both medieval and Tudor texts and their readers.[27] Studies of early modern readers have generally been more numerous: indeed, this is a subject area recently described as 'in danger of drowning in the diversity of case studies'.[28] Individual readers who have received sustained attention include John Dee (1527–1609), Gabriel Harvey (1552/3–1631), and William Drake (1606–69).[29] There have also been significant overviews of early modern reading practices, based largely on the study of handwritten additions to printed books, and including consideration of printed marginalia as well.[30] However, annotations made by early modern readers in the leaves of medieval manuscripts have not yet attracted significant attention.

The present study seeks to chart and understand the afterlife of medieval texts by investigating their reception at a particular time and in a particular location through an examination of the evidence for the ownership and use of surviving manuscript copies. It covers ground that is cognate with Mary Erler's recent account of reading and writing during the Dissolution, but takes a longer chronological view and considers the impact of the Henrician reformation and subsequent reforms on lay rather than religious readers.[31] It makes a case study of the books of two generations of an English family who spent their adult lives under Tudor rule; eight manuscripts that contain more than twenty individual texts (in full form or extracts) may certainly be associated with this family. Whilst the codices themselves date from the fifteenth century, some of the texts within them originated in the late fourteenth century. Yet

26 See Duffy, *Marking the Hours*, and Chapters 5 and 6 below.

27 Flannery and Griffin, *Spaces for Reading*.

28 Cambers, 'Readers' Marks and Religious Practice', p. 230.

29 Sherman, *John Dee*; Jardine and Grafton '"Studied for Action"'; Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions*; and see also Cambers's study of Lady Margaret Hoby cited in the previous note.

30 Key works include Jackson, *Marginalia*, Sherman, *Used Books*, and Slights, *Managing Readers*.

31 Erler, *Reading and Writing During the Dissolution*.