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Introduction

PAUL POPLAWSKI

With thirty-one essays covering such a broad range of topics, authors, texts and contexts, it would be impractical, and probably of limited use, to try to present a full introductory summary of all this material in one single general introduction. I have instead provided separate introductory notes at the start of each of the period sections, before each group of essays, in the hope that this will be of more immediate practical use to readers in relating my comments to the essays as they are about to be read. Nevertheless, having already explained the overall rationale and principles of organisation for the book in my preface, I would like to take this opportunity to outline just some of its key thematic contours and some of the shared features of the essays beyond their many individual differences of focus and approach – and then also to reflect briefly on the concept of 'context' and on the complexity of the relationship between texts and contexts.

Time, Space, Print Culture, Language

As one might expect with a book about historical contexts, the essays are organised in a broadly chronological sequence and they are grouped according to conventional English literary periodisation. Such periodisation has been the subject of much critical debate in recent years, but one paradoxical effect of following the evolving history of texts and contexts sequentially through these essays is precisely to be reminded that period contexts are not only constantly carried forwards in many complex ways (and often by literary texts themselves of course) but also operate retroactively in their own time by framing, shaping and colouring how previous periods are understood and interpreted. This is an understanding that all the contributors share, I think, and almost every single essay has the potential to send the reader shuttling backwards and forwards across all the other essays – and therefore backwards and forwards across English literary history. Consider, as one brief example, the trajectory from K. S. Whetter's early essay on medieval metrical romance through to Fiona Moolla's later consideration of romance elements in the fiction of modern-day Africa, passing by way of, among others, the Gothic romance of Austen's *Northanger Abbey* discussed by Katie Halsey. Such a relay of connections will, I hope, reinforce the sense that once we

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begin to look closely at texts in relation to their contexts, it becomes difficult to separate them off categorically from other texts and contexts shadowing them within the same broad cultural history, however far separated in time they may be and however carefully one tries to divide or periodise that history. Thus, despite the book's conventionally periodised structure (or perhaps partly because of it), the essays themselves, cumulatively, offer critical resistance to being corralled in this way and certainly to any suggestion of a mechanistic relationship among texts, contexts and periods.

Individually, too, most of the essays reflect at least implicitly on questions of period and on how we might negotiate transhistorical networks of connections and continuities in an adequately flexible and nuanced way. Lee Morrissey's essay is particularly helpful here in that it takes the issue of literary periodisation directly as its main theme and explores it in some sophisticated detail. Anna Budziak's essay on T. S. Eliot is also noteworthy in this respect for its meticulous placing of a text both within its own contemporaneous contexts and, in a sort of palimpsestic reading, in relation to texts and contexts from different past periods. Eliot's own famous concern for tradition is of course highly pertinent to all this, but Budziak almost out-Eliots him in a reading which subtly brings to focus one of the main realisations that I hope readers will take away from this book; that contexts operate synchronically *and* diachronically – *and* at the same time!

If questions of time are an inescapable feature of a project concerned with historical contexts, so too are questions of space, place, travel and mobility: again, almost every essay here touches on such questions in some way or other. Given that one basic definition of 'context' is 'setting', this could hardly be otherwise; and, of course, literature has had travels and journeying in its DNA from the very earliest human narratives. Significantly, the first essay in this collection, by Emily Thornbury, begins by addressing René Wellek's question 'What and where is a poem?' before embarking on a hugely absorbing tour of the many places of the peculiarly mobile Old English poem, *The Dream of the Rood*. Among many other things, her essay suggests how, in Anglo-Saxon culture, sacramental places and objects, pilgrimages, processions, performance and poetry all appear to have been interdependent and interwoven phenomena, simultaneously both artistic texts and material social contexts. In a rather different way Ulla Rahbek's final essay, too, in its consideration of postcolonial fiction and contemporary migrant narratives, and dealing with questions of mobility and community, identity and belonging, makes us think about how we negotiate our place in the world by negotiating literal places in the world, whether locally or globally. Global and transnational perspectives underpin the discussions of several other essays (e.g. those by Petrina, Grogan, Roberts and Kuortti) and the anthropology of space, place and travel is helpfully adumbrated by Stefania Michelucci's essay on Lawrence's *Women in Love*; while Terry Gifford's ecocritical study of the poetry of Ted Hughes reminds

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us of our fundamental placement on the earth and of the precarious future that now faces the human story-text within *its* defining context.

Related in some complex ways to questions of time and space, the broad theme of material print culture can be seen as a further permeating background for the whole collection. Several essays focus on the subject directly, but it also indirectly informs many, if not most, of the others. Clearly, the practical, material contexts involved in the production, circulation and consumption of literary texts, along with their transmission and reception through time, are of central importance to understanding how English literature has evolved and, crucially, how it has interacted at different times and in different places with pertaining social, cultural, economic, and ideological forces. The essays by Filip Krajník, Alessandra Petrina, Jane Grogan, Richard Jones, Katie Halsey, Ben Moore, Fionualla Dillane, Sue Asbee and Catherine Riley are particularly relevant here in providing a vivid sense of some of the complex networks of relationships that have been involved in material print culture through the ages and that continue to shape English literary history to the present.

My title claims that this is a book about *English* literature. But, in standing back to make this brief review of the collection, I see now just how much the essays have tended to contextualise English texts and traditions by reference to *non*-English texts and traditions. This may have something to do with the international nature of the team of contributors, but it is perhaps only natural, too, bearing in mind the mixed linguistic roots of the English language, still so clearly evident in the Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods, and bearing in mind the language's phenomenal global spread from colonial and postcolonial times to the present. At almost every turn, it seems, 'English' literature has developed out of, or in close interaction with, literature from other cultures and in other languages. The obvious early importance of translations and pan-European literary interchange is made very clear here in several of the essays (see, for example, Krajník's essay on Chaucer as translator). Even such a very British-seeming author as Tobias Smollett drew in a major way from European classics such as Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, as Richard Jones shows in his essay. Smollett was in fact Scottish, and we also need to remember that when we talk of English literature we often too easily elide Scottish, Irish and Welsh literary, linguistic and cultural influences with those of England. Grogan's essay makes this clear in relation to Ireland, while the essays by Fiona Price on Walter Scott and Jane Porter and by Robert Wilcher on Henry Vaughan draw attention to Scottish and Welsh contexts respectively. From Aphra Behn's Guianas-based *Oroonoko* in Oddvar Holmesland's essay to Izabel Brandão's reading of the contemporary work of Guyana-born British poet Grace Nichols, and from the early influences of India on English literature explored by Daniel Sanjiv Roberts to the 'chutnification' of English in Salman Rushdie's fiction discussed in Joel Kuortti's essay, this volume

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clearly bears strong witness to the supra-Englishness of English literature. One might even be inclined to adapt Wellek's question above and ask: what and where, then, is English literature?

Texts, Contexts, Contexture

As the orthography of the words clearly announces, texts and contexts are closely related. They are, in fact, mutually defining and it is particularly useful here to remember that the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s foundational definition of 'context' is explicitly textual, referring to the parts of a text that 'immediately precede and follow a word or passage and clarify its meaning'. I stress this point because other common definitions and everyday understandings of 'context' obscure this original text-based connection in referring outwards to notions of 'setting', 'circumstances' or 'environment' – that is, to concrete notions of immediate place or location or surroundings, as, for example, in the following sentence: 'This was highly inappropriate behaviour in the context of a lecture.' Mediating between these two leading definitions we also have the discursive and obviously relational sense of 'in relation to', as in: 'In the context of environmental concerns, we should all use less plastic.' All three of these senses are important to this book and, together, they make clear that context is what *defines* any given situation, whether abstract or concrete, textual or actual.

But this only takes us so far. *How* exactly does context define the situation and which parts of the context do the defining? This is perhaps clearer in the 'textual' definition above, as we can in principle point to specific words that clarify a meaning in a given passage – but even then, with anything longer than a short phrase or two, it quickly becomes a matter of judgement and interpretation as to exactly which words are the decisive ones. And there's the rub: contexts need defining and interpreting just as much as texts and situations do. This is where the mutuality of definition comes in and where we see that contexts are defined by texts as much as the other way round and that the concept of 'context' is altogether a much more slippery and complex one than might at first appear. Indeed, its complexity in relation to literary texts will become ever clearer as this volume progresses and as each of the essays introduces new ways of understanding it. However, let me offer a brief etymological reflection on our two keywords as a means of preparing the ground for the essays to come and of helping to clarify at least the general nature of this complexity.

As already noted, the words 'text' and 'context' are lexically related and the construction 'con + text', at its simplest, means just 'with', 'together with', 'beside' or 'against' the text. We might say, then, that the context 'frames' or 'sets off' the text, complementing and/or contrasting with it, putting it into relief, as it were,

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and that this is how it clarifies the text's meaning. A consideration of the original Latin roots of the words can help to nuance our understanding of this relationship further. Thus, 'text' can be related back to *texere*, which means 'to weave', and to *textus*, meaning 'web', 'fabric', or 'texture'. In parallel, 'context' relates to *contexere*, 'to interweave', and *contextus*, 'woven together'.

These terms nicely evoke the *material* elements of textuality; but, most importantly for my purposes here, they suggest a useful metaphorical distinction (and relationship) between the finished 'weaving', or woven fabric, of the text and the surrounding tangle of events and circumstances – the context – from which the threads of that weaving have been drawn. As already noted, a text's contexts are often seen as its 'background' or 'setting', the various elements (historical, biographical, social, etc.) that 'frame' it and clarify its meanings, giving it definition as a discrete and apparently autonomous signifying entity. But we can now see the paradox that while a text may be 'set off' by its contexts, those contexts are also inevitably *inter*woven into the very fabric of the text and remain an inextricable part of its meanings. In this light, we need to reject any clear-cut binary distinction between texts and contexts and to think, rather, in the above terms, of a *continuous* field, or network, of signification that links texts and contexts together flexibly within an interwoven fabric or web of meanings.

This is certainly the sort of complex conception of relations that informs this volume's general approach to reading texts in context. However, it still does not quite capture the full complexity of how texts and contexts interact, partly because it does not explicitly acknowledge the complicating dimension of time. Not only are texts always subject to changing contexts of production, circulation and reception across time, to changing frameworks of analysis, understanding and interpretation, but texts themselves can also exert historical influences both on contexts and on other texts. As already noted, moreover, contexts need to be interpreted just as much as texts do and they are therefore equally subject to changing paradigms of interpretation and understanding. As also outlined earlier, this dimension of time is a prominent theme in the essays which follow, and the interwoven web of meanings mentioned above ideally needs to be understood not just in spatial terms but as extending backwards and forwards in time as well.

The terms of the above etymology have suggested to me a type of critical neologism with which I would like to conclude this introduction, and it is a neologism that I offer, in part, as a tribute to my contributors. My many hours spent immersed in their essays have left me with an almost tactile sense of interacting texts and contexts and the image I am left with is of some thickly interwoven web of fabric, with substantial breadth, depth and extension, *and* with multiple ghostly threads tracing their ways back and forth through time to conjure up yet more such webs of fabric down the ages. To describe these essays, then, merely as 'contextual readings', while perfectly accurate in some ways, now seems

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somehow inadequate to the task of conveying the full nature and achievement of these essays in capturing the complexities of interrelating texts and contexts. I therefore propose an alternative ‘con’ word, which I think better communicates the material practice of these essays: ‘contextured’. This is a relatively rare word, but the noun ‘contexture’, while also related to ‘context’, has a general meaning of ‘structure’ and refers mainly to ‘the weaving together of parts into one body’ and, most appropriately here, to a style of composition in writing which entails such a weaving together of parts into one whole.

These essays, then, I suggest, are best considered not so much as contextual but as contextural or *contextured* readings, readings which, as they explore complex webs of interacting meanings, weave texts and contexts tightly together into what is effectively one indivisible but richly textured body of discourse.

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PART I
Medieval English, 500–1500

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Emily Thornbury's study of *The Dream of the Rood* provides the perfect opening for this collection in immediately highlighting the fluid boundaries and intricate interdependencies between texts and contexts in the early medieval period. Thornbury's quest to discover the answer to exactly what and where the poem is, is in itself an immediate challenge to our usual contemporary understanding of texts as discrete and self-contained entities largely defined by the physical borders of page and book. In her discussion of the various manifestations of *The Dream of the Rood*, we are effectively asked if the poem is a monument or a manuscript, a performance or a devotional practice, and we gain a sense of a mobile, shape-shifting type of textuality always inextricably intermingled with its various surrounding contexts. (In this, it might be interesting to consider if there are any possible analogies here with contemporary digital textuality; and see, for example, Essay 19 for the different mediations of Fionnuala Dillane's discussed text, *Carmilla*, from Victorian serial to digital blog.)

If Thornbury's essay raises the question of where texts and contexts begin and end, Filip Krajník's essay might be understood to ask the additional question of where 'authorship' begins and ends. For us, the relationship between author and text, and the status of the author *as* author, as 'original creator', are generally taken for granted as relatively straightforward matters. But, as we know, and as Krajník's title suggests, the medieval writer was not seen in the individualistic terms of the 'creative genius' figure we have inherited from the Romantic era, a figure who supposedly creates a text *ab initio*, but as someone more akin to a scribe, an editor or translator, someone seen to be passing on some form of pre-existing text, even if newly 'processed' in one way or another. As Krajník's carefully contextualised argument develops, moreover,

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the importance of Chaucer's *actual* translations of works from other languages emerges, too, as a central feature of Chaucer's own sense of 'authorship' and as it fed intertextually (along with other people's translations) into works such as *The Parliament of Fowls*, which is the textual focus of the essay. Krajník's reflections on medieval models of authorship and the elucidation of background linguistic and cultural influences emphasise again the permeable boundaries between texts and contexts – and, in exploring some of the possible historical occasions for which *The Parliament* may have been written, Krajník also stresses the important connection for Chaucer between his text and its informing social function. *The Parliament of Fowls* may not exhibit quite the pronounced textual 'mobility' as *The Dream of the Rood*, especially as the text appears to have a more definite anchor in a known 'author', but, coming to Krajník's essay in the immediate light of Thornbury's essay, we still see some of the same factors of fluidity between text and context in the inevitably intertextual notion of the 'translator'.

Chaucer's translation of the *Roman de la Rose* and his own significant contribution to medieval romance literature make a natural bridge to the next essay where K. S. Whetter expertly sketches out the evolution of the genre from twelfth-century France onwards, before turning to a sustained analysis of two representative examples of Arthurian romance, *Ywayne and Gawayne* and *The Awntyrs off Arthure*. Whetter neatly maps out the social, cultural and political terrain informing medieval romance, with special attention to how the genre absorbed and expressed issues to do with kingship and loyalty, with local lordship and feudal estate management, and with the roles and rights of aristocratic and gentry women. He suggests at the conclusion of his essay that the ability of romance to explore key aspects of social life may or may not have been a major reason for its *initial* emergence as a genre, but that this was almost certainly a major reason for its subsequent growth and popularity from medieval times to the present – and evidence of this ongoing popularity is not hard to find among other essays in this collection as one proceeds through the different period sections, especially if we are alert to the various ways in which the romance genre constantly evolves and reinvents itself. Lee Morrissey in Essay 9 reminds us of the genre's influence on the emergence of the novel ('roman') and Oddvar Holmesland's Essay 10 discusses Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* specifically in terms of romance. It is useful, further, to consider ways in which the concept and genre of romance might be seen to be absorbed and reworked in Romanticism. As I mentioned in my introduction, too, Fiona Moolla's postcolonial essay

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on romance in modern African fiction provides an interesting contemporary coordinate here (see Essay 27 and note that Moolla's references to critical works on romance helpfully complement Whetter's).

All three essays in this section, in very different ways, concern themselves with the transmission, mediation and circulation (if not recycling) of texts. It might be instructive then to see them in the light of the contemporary concept within print culture studies of a 'communications circuit' and to set them in dialogue with later essays which discuss related issues (in particular, Essays 4, 5, 11, 14 and 19).

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1 Finding *The Dream of the Rood* in Old English Literature

EMILY V. THORNBURY

Abstract

The Old English poem called *The Dream of the Rood* has challenged audiences for more than a thousand years. It is precocious in content, using the dream vision to open up a fictional space for contemplation; within that space, it demands that readers emotionally re-experience the central mystery of the Christian religion. In this way it anticipates much later medieval literary trends. *The Dream of the Rood* is also formally challenging, using wordplay, complex shifts in metre and haunting repetitions to weave a complex web of affect and meaning. It is a triumph of craft, which perhaps explains why it seems to have been popular across early medieval England.

The poem is also elusive, multiform. One text appears in a tenth-century manuscript; others, close kin, are engraved on objects – a monumental stone cross and a gold reliquary. Still other echoes of *The Dream of the Rood* appear across the corpus of Old English verse.

Which is the real poem? How can we, today, read a text that presents to us such varied faces, especially when none of them can be tied to any author whose name and life we know?

This essay considers modern scholars' varied answers to these questions, answers which help us perceive how early literature's voices – and its silences – can echo or reply to much later concerns. In the medieval reception of *The Dream of the Rood* and its tradition, we will also see ways to pose these questions altogether differently – and thus to rethink the way we understand poetry's place in the world.

The Old English poem we call *The Dream of the Rood* challenges modern assumptions about the nature of a literary text in space and time. René Wellek's counterintuitive but revealing question in *Theory of Literature* – 'What and where is a poem?' – takes on new resonance in an early medieval context.[1] One poem which we call *The Dream of the Rood* appears in a tenth-century manuscript called the Vercelli Book. It is a copy, made from another text now lost, and may have been copied from a copy – and perhaps rewritten along the way. A poem which is too

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