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Spearing, A. C. Medieval Autographies: The “I” of the Text

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Spearing, A. C.

Medieval Autographies: The "I" of the Text.

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. Pp. viii, 347. ISBN 978-0-268-01782-8 (paperback) \$32.

In his most recent book, A. C. Spearing picks up some of the threads of his earlier work, especially those he lays out in *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford University Press, 2005), adding to the compelling case he has made that much of our reading of medieval narrative leads us astray. The problem, Spearing has argued, is that we understand subjectivity anachronistically, in terms borrowed from the novel and the dramatic monologue, not those familiar to medieval writers. Seeking to move scholars of medieval literature away from what he sees as a crippling tendency to reduce all acts of narration to a paradigm that stresses the "unreliable narrator," Spearing has argued previously that the kind of hermeneutic gap that we imagine existing between the author and the narrator would have been difficult if not impossible for a medieval writer to comprehend. To read medieval literature, then, we must look elsewhere for our critical footholds.

Medieval Autographies begins with the same premise but extends and refines it by focusing on texts that are related in the first person; more specifically, on the French *dit*, which comes to prominence in the mid-thirteenth century, and one of its primary reflexes, the prologue, which becomes a dominant English form about a century later.

Spearing believes we should call such texts "autographies," a term that recognizes their difference from autobiographies, which depend on conveying individual subjectivity through textual expression. As Spearing points out, even medieval life stories, such as Margery Kempe's, fail to delineate personalities so much as the exemplarity of experience or what "souls have in common" (36). In other texts, too, including Machaut's *dits* and Chaucer's *General Prologue*, the "I" of the medieval poet is not systematically or consistently related to the representation of a single individual's consciousness. Adopting the term autography, moreover, opens up for us the common characteristics of first-person narratives, which Spearing demonstrates are often concerned with the act and problematics of writing itself.

Through nicely shaped readings of Machaut's *Dit de la fontaine amoureuse* and other *dits*, Spearing shows that neither *dits* nor dream visions offer

the kind of “unitary consciousness” that critics seek (even if they only seek to show the distance between the narrator’s consciousness and that of the author). The “I” of these poems is separated from the author (as modern readers would expect), but that separation does not open up the kind of interpretive possibilities it does in Browning’s dramatic monologues or the realist novel. Instead, Spearing shows, the “I” is a “proximal deictic”: the speaker’s “identity is of no importance” (57).

The book moves from French to English texts, focusing for most of its length on the English prologues of Chaucer and other writers. The narrative conventions of these prologues are similar in many ways to those of the *dit* and the dream vision. The “I” of these prologues, which scholars since George Lyman Kittredge’s “dramatic” readings of *The Canterbury Tales* have tended to see as a sign of subjectivity, is actually, again, not that at all. Even in the Chaucerian prologue that modern readers find most autobiographical, the Wife of Bath’s, Spearing shows how the text actually presents quite an inconsistent engagement with subjectivity. As the text demonstrates, and as readers more contemporary to Chaucer seem to have understood, the Wife’s *Prologue* alternates what seem like plausibly autobiographical details with an “I” that does not and cannot accord with the supposed speaker, an “I” in short that cannot be the Wife and is not intended by Chaucer to be the Wife. Here, then, is a “textual performance” of a wife, albeit one with many, if inconsistent, gestures toward the delineation of an actual speaking subject. In such texts, the speaker’s “I” functions not to convey life experiences but as a rhetorical device to transmit meaning.

In the second half of the book, Spearing moves from the relative familiarity of Chaucer’s prologues to less widely-read works by Thomas Hoccleve and Osbern Bokenham. These fifteenth-century writers of the Chaucerian tradition offer compelling evidence that the full encoding of subjectivity in the first-person pronoun was yet to take place, though Spearing demonstrates that the move from autography to autobiography is underway in their works.

In a work that is solidly grounded on careful textual analysis and defies easy refutation, Spearing interjects a middle chapter that is slightly speculative, considering why the autography developed when it did. The result is a perceptive consideration of the motivations of medieval writers, who might have been drawn to the autography’s openness as a way to break from the pre-determined narratives and forms of earlier texts. These texts, then, provide evidence of

experimentalism with rhetorical and literary devices that become clearer and clearer as our reading progresses from Machaut to Bokenham and that presage further developments in the post-medieval world. Even in this speculative section, the standards of evidence are high.

Spearing's book is engaging and perceptive. Grounded on a careful consideration of the primary texts and a nuanced and capacious reading of his peers' works, *Medieval Autographies* adds a convincing argument against the assumption that we can find modern expressions of subjectivity in medieval texts.

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