

# RESEÑAS DE LIBROS | BOOK REVIEWS



**Ardis Butterfield, Ian Johnson and Andrew Kraebel. Eds. *Literary Theory and Criticism in the Later Middle Ages. Interpretation, Invention, Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. xxv + 331 p. ISBN: 9781108698351. Hardcover: £ 100**

Reviewed by J. CARLOS TEIXEIRA  
CITCEM, CETAPS, Universidade do Porto  
jcteixeira@letras.up.pt

and  
LUÍS DANTAS  
Universidade do Porto  
luislucianodantas@gmail.com

The comprehension of literary theory and criticism that we currently have diverges from the prevailing views during the Middle Ages, where such frameworks were largely non-existent. In fact, the conception of literature itself has become far more dynamic than in medieval times. While some foundational concepts of contemporary theory might find their roots in medieval texts, it is undeniable that modern literary theory and criticism present themselves as established schools of thought, occasionally even assuming institutional form. Moreover, the approach to literary theory and criticism varies considerably, often intertwining with commentaries and blending with diverse realms of thought – be it religious, philosophical, or cultural. Perhaps owing to these factors, alongside others (such as fragmentation or even lack of theoretical texts), there is a tendency for a certain detachment between Medieval Studies and Literary Theory and Criticism. Nevertheless, despite this perceived divergence, Ardis Butterfield, Ian Johnson, and Andrew Kraebel were not deterred from publishing *Literary Theory and Criticism in the Later Middle Ages*, a compilation crafted in honour of Alastair Minnis. On account of its innovation alone, the book merits praise – and the quality of the twelve articles that comprise the book in no way disappoints this praise and initial suspicion that one would be facing a dense, complex work of serious scientific rigor.

The edition opens with a note by Vincent Gillespie entitled “The Career and Contributions of Alastair Minnis”. Always dedicated to medieval exegesis and scholastic literary theory, in a time when these were in need of a profound renovation to become more rigorous, Minnis studied, published, and taught in several universities all around the world. Being a *pontifex* figure, the scholar created a productive synthesis among Literary Studies, Theory and Criticism, Historiography and Scholastic Philosophy. Described by his pupils as a *magister lectoris*, he has revolutionized the peripheral area of late medieval literary studies with comprehensive and systematic works.

The introduction, titled “Criticism, Theory, and the Later Medieval Text” and written by Andrew Kraebel, not only outlines the themes of each subsequent chapter

but also delves into the topics of interpretation, invention, and imagination. Despite the rejection of categorical schisms between the vernacular and the religious Latin, he is forced to agree that the scholastic task was that of interpretation and invention, in a restricted sense of combining pre-existing materials and methods. The phantastic and imaginative, on the other hand, were more restricted to the vernacular, and were looked at with suspicion. Moreover, Kraebel also delves into the world of criticism and theory in the scholastic world. While the author chose to name the commentaries – in form of disperse and paratextual glosses, regarding the texts of the Antiquity, or forming a more systematic and autonomous unit of prose, in the case of Holy Writ – with the contemporary term «criticism»; he carefully expounded the idiosyncrasies of the scholastic thought and terminology regarding theory. *Theoria* or *theorica* was understood as contemplation of the Divine Light. Although it could be obtained through the Holy Scripture and should be the ultimate purpose of the *physis* and *philosophia*, as well as its orienting principle, it had nothing to do with the study of text, a task that belonged to the vague and subsidiary of rhetoric, *poesis*. After this illuminating exposition, the reader is given to understand that what is now known as literary studies had, in the late Middle Ages, no well stablished body or frontiers, being, thus, in an embryonic state.

Cleverly, the chapter's section opens with Marjorie Curry Woods' essay, "Access through Accessus Gateways to Learning in a Manuscript of School Texts", wherein she delves into the discussion of 6 *accessiis* found in *Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 391*, which are believed to have been extensively familiar to medieval scholars. Much like an *accessus* in its own right, Woods' scholarly essay merits commendation for its skilful blend of elucidation and exploration. She clarifies the texts by offering concise reflections after each *accessus*, addressing various facets of each, while also delving into comparative insights gleaned throughout her analysis. Ultimately, it provides the reader with a clearer grasp of the *accessus* presented, and it elucidates their application in the instruction of Latin literature during the Middle Ages.

In order to sustain the comprehensiveness and unity of the literary studies and production in the Late Middle Ages, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne shows the affinities of "Scholastic Theory and Vernacular Knowledge" in a chapter of the same title. Following Curry Woods' topic *accessus ad auctores*, the author then clarifies the changes that occurred within the prologues after the adoption of the Aristotelian principle of the four causes. Henceforward, Wogan-Browne illustrates them with several examples of vernacular texts that were built upon this scheme, the most exemplary being the *Lumere as lais* (1268). This Old-French theological encyclopaedia by Pierre de Fetcham has, according to him, God and the human author – His instrument – as efficient cause, and Christ as creator and creature – the theme of the encyclopaedia – as material cause. The formal cause refers to the structure or manner in which *Lumere as lais* is written, such as a book of questions and answers. Its final cause pertains to the intended audience and the author's aim of seeking forgiveness of sins and attaining grace to behold the face of God. The author then proceeds with the presentation of several

examples that illustrate the stereotypical and topological dimension that this prologue-structure gained, from treatises on falconry to hybrid compositions of historiography, novel, and *chanson de geste*. On the one hand this shows the harmony between the precepts of scholastics and literary practices, on the other hand it also clarifies the challenging and precarious status of the literary and the thoughts concerning it in the Middle Ages, because of the abundance of different texts that showed the same Aristotelian principles.

In the following chapter, “Poetics and Biblical Hermeneutics in the Thirteenth Century”, Gilbert Dahan expounds how the rediscovery of Aristotle’s works, especially the translation of *Poetics* paved the way to profound developments in exegesis and in the poetic science. Embedded in scientific spirit, theology was not only elevated to the status of science, but it was also considered to be the first and most noble of them, having, therefore, the most noble and scientific of languages. Hence, the artificial or scientific language emerged as the paragon, characterized by qualities such as clarity, definition, analysis, and synthesis. This line of thought was complemented by the suspicion and devaluation of poetic language, which was prone to falsity and listed the metaphorical, parabolic, and symbolic among its character. However, the Church Doctors were quick to realize that the Holy Writ shared much more of the poetic mode than that of the scientific. Arguing that the word of God revealed eternal truths that were too overwhelming for man’s reason, the Scripture was taken in its material form as containing a sum of several poetic modes and devices that alluded to spiritual truths to be uncovered by the exegete. This task required the mastering and ordering of several poetic modes, such as the narrative, the exhortative and enigmatic mode. Of high interest in this contribution is the scholastic view of poetic language, in a rather contemporary way, not as an entity in itself, but as something that dwells in diverse manners in different texts. Nevertheless, this analysis primarily served as a means of dissecting biblical texts for religious purposes.

Ralph Hanna opens the subsequent chapter with “Robert Holcot and *De vetula*: Beyond Smalley’s Assessment”. His focus lies on the exegete Robert Holcot, specifically his ideas and their clear connection to the pseudo-Ovidian *De vetula*, extending Beryl Smalley’s analysis to offer a deeper understanding of the exegetical significance within the author’s texts. This expanded exploration also serves as a way to try and explain Holcot’s fascination during the Middle Ages. To accomplish this, Hanna leads the reader through a close reading examination of sections from the prologue of the *Super Sapientiam Salomonis*, showcasing how the author’s classroom performances and theological insights are both captivating and thought-provoking, requiring a thoughtful consideration of both biblical and non-biblical texts.

Notwithstanding the relevance of Andrew Kraebel’s next chapter for the question of authorship and exegesis in the Late Middle Ages, its focus lies more on religious and scholastic-thinking historiography than on literary theory or criticism. Apart from the insight on Rolle’s synthesis on the two bonaventurian instances of *commentator* and

*auctor*, as well as on his inspirational view of the authorship – a literary question as old as literature –, there is not much that relates directly to literary theory in “The Inspired Commentator. Theories of Interpretative Authority in the Writings of Richard Rolle”. In the more mystical works of Richard Rolle (d. 1349), the contemporary problem of Holy Ghost-Guidance of the Church Authors was the real question being answered. Unlike all rival positions, Rolle claimed to derive his authorship and authority directly from his mystical contemplations, asceticism and the Holy Ghost. These had previously guided the Church Fathers, a spirit that this author, who referred to himself as *modernus*, seeks to revive.

Joe Stadolnik proceeds to offer what appears to be an unconventional reflection: “Guitar Lessons at Blackfriars: Vernacular Medicine and Preachers’ Style in Henry Daniel’s *Liber uricrisiarum*”. The title refers to Stadolnik’s opening reflection, where he draws on the advice of the English Dominican John Bromyard that preachers should learn from musicians—specifically, their emphasis on efficiency in tuning, avoidance of excessive strumming, and ability to engage the audience effectively. The focus of the article is, however, on one of the authors influenced by Bromyard’s thoughts (properly contextualized within the article), namely Henry Daniel. Throughout the text, Stadolnik focuses on Daniel’s stylistic approach in *Liber uricrisiarum* in comparison with Dominican rhetorical theories, which allows the reader to comprehend how Daniel’s methods align/diverge with established rhetorical norms within that same tradition. With clearly defined objectives and employing a particularly illuminating and comparative approach, Stadolnik positions Henry Daniel within his historical and intellectual milieu, thus shedding light on the nuances of his approach to communication and its implications for both medical discourse and preaching practices of the time.

Similar to the fifth, the seventh chapter, “The Re-cognition of Doctrinal Discourse and Scholastic Literary Theory: Affordances of *Ordinatio* in Reginald Pecock’s *Donet and Reule of Crysten Religoun*”, by Jan Johnson, deals with a late and atypical scholastic conception of authority and authorship. However, this time the focused author (d.1459) is the archbishop Reginald Pecock. Pecock seems to deposit a high trust in rational procedures and – since reasoning was a gift from God, it could never defraud its user. Following this principle and writing for his new urban audience, in *Donet and Reule of Christen Religion*, Pecock excels in giving old topics such as the *Ten Commandments* and *The Creed* of the Apostles an unprecedented *ordinatio* so that they would fit his own system of Christian virtues. Johnson’s topic is very cleverly chosen to elucidate the true meaning and potential of the *compiler*, as well as the scholastic view on textual structures, *i. e.*, they are always inherently hierarchical and the order in which a subject is treated has the power to add a certain evaluation of the *compiler*, without requiring any explicit writing from him. Nevertheless, this chapter remains more pertinent to the historiography of catholic late-scholastic thought than for literary theory or criticism.

In Jessica Rosenfeld's forthcoming chapter, "Arts of Love and Justice: Property, Women, and Golden Age Politics in *Le Roman de la Rose*", she delves into one of medieval literature's most emblematic works exploring themes of love and its reimagining of the Golden Age utopia, while also pondering Ovidian ideas, particularly the intertwining of the erotic and the political. This examination of the text is deeply influenced by Aristotelian philosophy (and its interpretations during the Middle Ages), which highlights gender power dynamics largely centred on male dominance over women, often viewed as possessions. Through specific examples and three well-structured subsections, Rosenfeld compellingly demonstrates how these interpretations surface within the text, revealing the tensions between the empirical realities of scholastic philosophy and mythical narratives. Consequently, the article offers an intriguing perspective, showcasing a clash between ancient works (both mythological and theoretical) and scholastic ideology, thus illuminating the complex interplay of critical viewpoints on matters of love, politics, and ultimately, gender.

The article authored by Nicolette Zeeman transitions from the thirteenth to the fourteenth century and from French to English territory: "The Many Sides of Personification Rhetorical Theory and *Piers Plowman*". It seamlessly integrates into this anthology, as it delves into a concept central to literary criticism, namely personification and its related concepts. Zeeman's approach is noteworthy for its depth and thoroughness. She initiates with a succinct yet comprehensive overview of the Latin rhetorical theories of personification inherited by the Middle Ages, ensuring that the application of these theories is appropriately contextualized. Subsequently, Zeeman engages in a practical analysis, exploring the versatility, hybridity, and multifaceted nature of personification in medieval allegorical texts, particularly focusing on the works of William Langland and its implications for his understanding towards the Church. The article offers, therefore, a notably methodical perspective and, at times, quite innovative insights into the concept of personification, along with its significance in enhancing our understanding of literary texts.

Mary Carruthers in her turn offers a nuanced exploration of the realm of imagination, focusing particularly on its role in the act of creation. Entitled "Encountering Vision – Dislocation, Disquiet, Perplexity", Carruthers' work opens with an excerpt from Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, delving into Francis of Assisi's seraphic vision, which serves as a cornerstone for his method of meditation. Notably, Bonaventure himself adhered to monastic traditions of meditation and contemplation, themes which Carruthers further explores as integral components of creation and composition, by extending to various theoretical texts from authors such as Quintilian, Peter of Celle, and Bernard of Clairvaux. These texts underscore the significance of contemplative envisioning, wonder, and awe as pathways to understanding and appreciation, both within philosophy and art. Leveraging these visionary experiences, Carruthers corroborates these teachings with medieval literary works by providing readers with a comprehensive survey, referencing texts such as William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* and *Pearl*, which she delves

into with depth. In essence, Carruthers' article offers a literary account deeply rooted in the genesis of textual creation and it effectively bridges the realms of doctrinal practices and their application in literature.

Ian Cornelius' chapter, "George Colvile's Translation of *Consolation of Philosophy*", provides valuable insights into the production and publishing contexts of this peculiar work printed in 1556. Its first edition was a bilingual *quarto* with a dedication to Queen Mary of England and a prologue to its readers, which was shorter and simpler than usual and did not display the usual scholastic scheme. Its intellectual framework is clearly scholastic, in contrast to the more recent humanistic translations and works on Boethius; however, the exact sources and traditions that culminated in Colvile's translation are still unclear. After delving into a comparison with earlier translations and commentaries Cornelius concludes that one cannot establish precisely the sources and affinities of Colvile's translation, although it bears closer resemblance to those of Chaucer and Pseudo-Thomas. Despite the rigour and research evident in this article, as well as its relevance for the reception of Boethius in England, it is difficult to find a manner in which it may be related to any problematic concerning literary theory and criticism.

The final chapter, by Rita Copeland, "When did the Emotions become Political?", opens with a metatheoretical claim: theory was taken in this book as something as comprehensive as to embrace the emotional aspects of political discourses, as well as argumentative and linguistic structures of literary texts. With these delimitations drawn, she proceeds to analyse the pioneering *Rhetoric* of Aristotle in its systematic, pragmatological and phenomenological treatment of human emotions and the way in which this was again taken into consideration by Giles of Rome. After producing a commentary on *Rhetoric* in 1271, Giles wrote in 1277 a political treatise, *De regimine principum*, in which the ideal prince is advised to take the best advantage of his *pathos* and that of his subjects, for emotions are a sort of universal language. Without being able to ascertain whether Thomas Hobbes or Giambattista Vico had ever read *De regimine*, Copeland then demonstrates how the Hobbesian conception of the political human and the affirmations of Vico's *New Science* concerning the origin of language share some similarities with the thoughts of Giles of Rome. She then concludes her essay with her initial and thought-provoking assertion that it was this scholastic author who started the modern emotional conception of the political and that (literary) theory should also embrace this probable future pilot-science of the emotions.

The collection of essays is certainly praiseworthy for a variety of reasons. Not only does it treat a relatively unstudied topic with scientific rigor, expertise, and detail, but it also serves as an introduction to scholastic thought on text, writing, the linguistic and the literary for every interested reader. In fact, any serious attempt to merge the modern and intricate field of literary theory with the also highly complex and now so distant medieval thought is in itself awe-deserving. However, the difficulty of this task seemed to have gained the upper hand in some essays, where, notwithstanding their



overall relevance and intrinsic value no proper literature theoretical or critical issue was being treated. In fact, the vast majority of the essays, besides frequent logic gaps in relating some topics, only collected abstract scholastic models or frameworks, and tried to find their reflexion on contemporary written productions, regardless of their literary status. Yet, not every abstraction applied, or related in some way to a text or discourse necessarily falls into the realm of literary theory or criticism.

This is understandable and, to a certain point, even expectable: literary theory, as a contemporary field, may present challenges when juxtaposed with past understandings of that which we now call «literature». However, and despite this incoherence, the anthology is dense, complex, and scientific, as delving into diverse literary, critical, and theoretical potentials remains vital for comprehending Literature and its development as an entity and institution.