
The playful chiastic title of this book does not really name its subject, which is narrowly defined and very strictly argued. By the first two terms of her title Coleman means the recreational reading aloud of “court-oriented,” secular, vernacular writing in English to monarchs, nobles, and a few other persons of high status, all of whom were literate auditors. She explicitly excludes from consideration ‘the drama and most romances, histories, non-recreative translations, and scholarly works of science or philosophy’ as well as ‘religious reading’ and ‘reading by or to children’ (p. xi). The ‘France’ of the title means in fact both France and Burgundy, which are discussed in a scant twenty pages (pp. 109–128) that focus on ‘romance, love poetry, and histories’ in French (p. 110). The English texts under consideration run from the fourteenth through the early sixteenth century, and are almost exclusively poetic. Coleman gives pride of place to Chaucer, who gets a whole chapter to himself, and also considers Gower, Langland, the Gawain-poet, Lydgate, Caxton, Douglas, and a number of other familiar authors and texts.

Her main historical claim is that elite audiences during the late medieval period often preferred to listen to books read aloud rather than to read them privately, although of course private reading occurred. The basic evidence for this kind of public reading, or ‘prelection’ as Coleman calls it, was first published by Ruth Crosby in *Speculum* in 1936 and 1938, and the claim will seem self-evident to seasoned readers of the authors listed above. Coleman carefully examines many further examples that show that the claim is indisputably true, at least for this highly restricted body of material and for audiences that ‘included the sort of literate upper-middle- and upper-class readers for whom Chaucer wrote’ (p. xi). She does not discuss whether devotional texts were read publicly or privately, class-bound methods of ‘reading’ legal documents, or similar topics that lie outside her defined subject.

The special feature of the book is her passionate desire to correct the influential modern views advanced by Havelock, Ong, and Goody which, in the author’s opinion, distort the medieval testimony about ‘aurality,’ the term she uses for the reading aloud of written texts to one or more literate listeners. Coleman is intent on dismantling the polarity of ‘orality’ vs. ‘literacy’ in favor of a more sophisticated model along the lines developed by Ruth Finnegan and Brian Street. In the first three of her seven chapters she criticizes, with great thoroughness, the internal inconsistencies of what she calls ‘the standard theory,’ its narrow bi-polar theoretical base, and its use of implicit teleological and evolutionary models when the situation is far more complicated: ‘what one finds in later medieval England, at least, is a state of acute mixedness, manifested both in the voiced textuality of the read-aloud manuscript and in the interactions of that mode of reception with private reading as ascribed by authors to themselves or to their audiences’ (p. 27).
I think most readers of Chaucer (Coleman's most frequent witness) would certainly agree with that characterization of 'aurality' as we find it in his work. Coleman acknowledges that 'admitting aurality into literary history makes relatively little difference to how one goes about literary criticism. We can still do close readings...because the work was written' (p. 74). But she cares deeply about getting 'aurality' right. She wants the model to match the evidence. This has led her to adopt many of the accoutrements of social science. There are taxonomic charts of 'transmission and reception modalities' and 'exophoric and endophoric mentalities,' a revision of M.B. Parkes's typology of medieval English literacies (p. 88), and even a Glossary of her special terminology. Some readers may be dismayed or annoyed by her need to invent her own jargon, but it is in the service of a more accurate and more systematic approach to her subject. When, in the titles to her last two chapters (on Chaucerian and non-Chaucerian English literature), she describes her central enterprise as an 'ethnography of reading,' she has the good grace to put the term in quotation marks. It indicates an appropriate unease with the scope of her analysis, which is thorough and convincing but treats a very narrow field.

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