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Historiographical essay

Literacy, reading, and writing in the medieval West

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Abstract

Over the last quarter century, a plethora of studies on literacy, reading, and writing in medieval Europe have contributed significantly to our understanding of medieval society and culture. Nevertheless the sheer number of these studies and their authorship by scholars in several different disciplines have obscured the relationships between these studies, their common themes and their differences. This essay seeks to survey this literature and its background, to explicate its contributions to the field of medieval history, and to suggest avenues for future study. It also reveals how approaches developed outside medieval studies were borrowed and adapted by medievalists, and how the study of literacy, reading, and writing in the Middle Ages has, in turn, influenced the work of ancient and modern historians. © 2000 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

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It is no surprise that those of us who make it our business to study the distant past should dwell so obsessively upon the written word. Written texts, after all, are far and away our most abundant resource for understanding the long defunct people and societies that constitute the subject of our investigations. Of course, most medieval historians use texts principally as a means *through* which to see the past. And because these written sources are spotty, tendentious, and often just plain wrong, historians have developed and applied rules of documentary evidence to separate the wheat from the tares. More recently, they have also borrowed from and adapted the methodologies of the social sciences, as well as the theoretical tools of philosophy and literary criticism. If these strategies have expanded the scope of the historian's gaze while at the same time giving him new tools with which to explore the past, they have also served to heighten his critical attitude toward his sources, thereby both foregrounding and problematizing those texts and his relationship to them, as well

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as his own agency in the making of history. This has led, somewhat paradoxically, to a number of historians questioning the very validity of the historical enterprise, while at the same time fostering the New Historicist movement in literary scholarship.¹

This more critical stance has, however, also brought about a greater consciousness of the potentialities of these textual survivals, encouraging a growing number of scholars in a number of disciplines to view them not as the *pis aller* residue of a lost world nor as purely literary phenomena, but as eloquent, historically contextualizable and contextualizing artifacts, worthy of investigation in their own right. That is, they are looking at writing and the written *in se*, at their concomitants, reading and literacy, and at writing's relationship to spoken communication. The proliferation of studies resulting from this new perspective and devoted to the manuscript culture of the medieval West has been substantial and diverse, especially over the last quarter century.² Yet this same volume and variety has tended to obscure the relationships between these studies, and this in turn has impeded a comprehensive consideration of their contribution to our historical understanding. The essay that follows is an attempt to begin addressing this desideratum.³

First, some definitions are in order. The terms 'literacy', 'reading', and 'writing' are in some senses distinct. Literacy is not simply the ability to read, though it is partly that. It is a complex cultural phenomenon with powerful ideological implications, which vary depending on the time, place, and milieu one is looking at. So, for example, literacy amongst the early Christians is not exactly the same thing as the literacy of the late medieval universities. Thus if literacy is, on the one hand, an individual skill, it is also an historically contextualized mentality. Moreover, in any given society, the kinds of literacy acquired by different individuals vary greatly, from the non-reading peasant who witnesses a charter, to the merchant who keeps his account books and the noblewoman who reads for edification and pleasure, to the university theology master. And any discussion of literacy must take into account the oral mode of communication which it complemented, substituted for, and often competed with. The history of reading, while closely linked with that of literacy, tends to focus, not surprisingly, on the act of reading itself. But while historians of reading pay a great deal of attention to the *how* and the *what* of reading, they also look at the *why*. Here, as in the case of literacy, there is a great deal of interest in establishing a mentality. But in the case of the history of reading, the focus is usually more narrow, looking at individuals or milieus, rather than at society at large. Writing has, of course, two principal meanings, being both composition and inscription. As far as composition is concerned, it can be looked at as a creative mental process, the traditional domain of literary and intellectual historians. It can also, however, be

¹ G.M. Spiegel, 'History, Historicism, and the social logic of the text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 65 (1990), 59–86.

² See the 'Bibliography of works on medieval communication', in: *New approaches to medieval communication*, ed. M. Mostert (Turnhout, 1999), 193–297.

³ The author wishes to make clear that any article-length treatment of such a vast field must by necessity be highly selective. It is also weighted towards works related to the author's own area of specialization.

treated at the more practical level of the formal organization of text, a sense that is more closely connected with that of inscription. And inscription itself has two inseparable aspects, being both the practice of inscribing and the material support upon which that inscription is performed. It is the second meaning of composition and both aspects of inscription that have provided the basis for the histories of 'written culture' that will be treated in this essay.

Of course, literacy, reading, and writing are also overlapping and interdependent cultural forms and practices, and no historical treatment can study one in isolation from the others. Yet because they are not exactly the same things, so too scholars have tended to concentrate upon one or the other. To some extent, the history of reading in the Middle Ages has attracted the attention of literary scholars, while writing has fallen more into the province of historians, palaeographers, and codicologists. Literacy, on the other hand, has been fair game for scholars in all disciplines. Their approaches towards their subjects can broadly be characterized as being either largely formalist or largely functionalist. Formalism puts theory before practice, and tries to discover the structures that underlie and cause the outward manifestations of ephemeral actions, practices, and social organizations. Functionalism seeks first to describe these acts, practices, and organizations, seeing structures as being simply the combination of these in any given time or place. The advantage of formalism is that it provides systemic explanations for cultural change. Nevertheless, formalism's great weakness is its tendency to reduce all the phenomena that come within its purview to a totalizing process. Functionalism, while it avoids this pitfall, can in its purest form offer little beyond description. With a few notable exceptions, most of the scholarship on literacy, reading, and writing falls along the functionalist end of the spectrum.

The interest of medievalists in the history of literacy, reading, and writing owes a great deal to developments outside the field of medieval studies. Although a few medievalists showed an interest in medieval literacy prior to the 1970s, they concerned themselves either with identifying literates and speculating about literacy rates or with uncovering evidence of oral-formulaic composition.⁴ While reading and writing received considerable attention from palaeographers and manuscript historians, their interest tended to be on the history of scripts, the transmission of texts, and the contents of medieval libraries. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, the development of new theoretical models and methodologies by scholars in fields outside of medieval studies revolutionized the way scholars looked at written communication. Most influential were the contributions of Eric Havelock and of Jack Goody and Ian Watt on ancient literacy, and of Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and Lucien Febvre and

⁴For example, V.H. Galbraith, 'The literacy of medieval English kings', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 21 (1935), 201–38; J.W. Thompson, *The literacy of the laity in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1939). On the vogue for oral-formulaic studies of literature in the 1950s–1970s, see P. Zumthor, 'The text and the voice', *New Literary History*, 16 (1984), 67–92.

Henri-Jean Martin in early modern European history.⁵ The impact and the problems of their work have been frequently analysed elsewhere, and I have no intention here to go over this well-trodden ground yet again. Suffice it to say that Havelock, Goody/Watt, and McLuhan, and Ong all reified alphabetic writing as a form of technology, and a technology which was causative of important changes in mental processes and social organization. McLuhan and, more convincingly, Ong carried this analogy to the technology of printing, which they saw as the second great watershed in the history of communications. And though Febvre/Martin took a more materialist approach to print technology, they showed, perhaps better than anyone else, how instrumental the printed book was in bringing about cultural change in early modern Europe. As to writing's effects on the civilization of the West, these studies were in general agreement about its instrumentality in the development of Western-style rationality, historical consciousness, and individualism. But they also assigned it a more sinister role, as a means to power for elites and as a corrosive acting on communal bonds.⁶ Recent work on the history of reading in the Middle Ages has also been influenced by studies from another quarter, that of critical theory, especially in the areas of hermeneutics and *Rezeptionästhetik*.⁷ Here again, the original subject of these approaches was not medieval texts and reading, but rather modern or post-modern literature, both of which are products of print culture.

As important as these new ways of looking at literacy and reading were to the study of ancient and modern societies, however, they tended to ignore or give only cursory attention to the Middle Ages. Thus the Middle Ages was given the minor role of either postscript or prehistory, a vast grey area perceived through a congeries of generalizations. In the 1970s, however, medievalists began taking up the challenge posed by the advances of their ancient and modernist colleagues. Thus in 1973 Malcolm Parkes, in an essay on the literacy of the laity in medieval England, suggested a three-tiered taxonomy of lay literacy in the later Middle Ages: 'That of the professional reader, which is the literacy of the scholar or the professional man of letters; that of the cultivated reader, which is the literacy of recreation; and that of the pragmatic reader, which is the literacy of one who has to read or write in the course of transacting any kind of business.'⁸ Parkes, who had his doubts about the extent of lay literacy in Latin during Carolingian times, assigned the turning point in lay literacy to the twelfth century, and to a particular milieu, the Anglo-Norman aristoc-

⁵E. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA, 1963); J. Goody and I. Watt, 'The consequences of literacy', *Comparative studies in society and history*, 5 (1963), 304–45; M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg galaxy. The making of typographic man* (Toronto, 1962); W.J. Ong, *The presence of the word. Some prolegomena for cultural and religious history* (New Haven, 1967); L. Febvre and H.J. Martin, *L'apparition du livre* (Paris, 1958), English trans. by D. Gerard, *The coming of the book. The impact of printing, 1450–1800* (London, 1978).

⁶This is a view they shared with the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss: *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. J. Weightman and D. Weightman (New York, 1974).

⁷On this see B. Stock, *Listening for the text. On the uses of the past* (Baltimore, 1990), 16–29.

⁸M.B. Parkes, 'The literacy of the laity', in: M.B. Parkes, *Scribes, scripts and readers. Studies in the communication, presentation and dissemination of medieval texts* (London, 1991), 275. Originally published in: *Literature and western civilization. The medieval world*, ed. D. Daiches and A.K. Thorleby (London, 1973), 555–76.

racy, who patronized the production of romance and history. Thus the earliest substantial cohort of lay readers were what Parkes called cultivated readers. By the latter part of the twelfth century, however, lay literacy began to diversify into the pragmatic literacy of the 'middle classes'. This pragmatic literacy increased in the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries among merchants, gentry, and even the servile manorial reeves who needed basic literacy in the vernacular, as well as familiarity with some stock Latin formulas, in order to be able to conduct business, go to court, and manage estates. Likewise the growth of royal administration and the common law employed more and more laymen, who became adept professional readers. Moreover, there was a tendency for the groups of both pragmatic and professional readers to become more cultivated over time. The demand for cultivated reading material created by this growing middle class led, in the course of the fourteenth century, to the rise of a commercial book trade and to the production of literature in the vernacular. More books and literature led in turn to more readers, so that, as far as reading was concerned, 'by 1400 the principal difference between the court and the increasing bourgeoisie was one of taste, not of literacy'.⁹ This middle-class readership tended to imitate the example of their betters, so that by the fifteenth century many middle-class readers showed considerable sophistication in their own writing, as evidenced in the such letter collections as those of the Stonors and Pastons. Moreover, the growth of pragmatic prose literature seems to have created an awareness of the 'poetic' and thus of the considerable potential of verse as a medium.¹⁰

Parkes' tripartite taxonomy, coupled with the earlier work of Herbert Grundmann on Latin literacy, recognized the diversity of medieval literacies and began what has become an ongoing process of contextualizing the literacy of medieval Europeans with greater and greater precision.¹¹ The search was now on to seek out and describe these literacies, in different times, places, and social groupings. One early example of this is found in Patrick Wormald's 1976 address to the Royal Historical Society on the 'uses of literacy' in the early Middle Ages.¹² Citing Pierre Riché's studies of early medieval education and Jack Goody's concept of 'restricted literacy', Wormald urged caution when it came to making claims about lay literacy in the early Middle Ages. Warning against assuming a literate audience on the basis of surviving works and inscriptions that appear to be addressed to them, or on the meagre and isolated anecdotal evidence of individual lay readers, he encouraged a more broadly based approach, one which 'must seek for *all* the symptoms of a *civilization de l'écrit*: not just inscriptions and the written vernacular, but also schools catering for laymen, books owned and written by laymen, and a significant role for writing in government'. This approach must, moreover, consider the literacy of a given country

⁹Parkes, 'Literacy of the Laity', 290.

¹⁰Parkes, 'Literacy of the Laity', 296.

¹¹H. Grundmann, 'Literatus-Illiteratus: Der Wandel einer Bildungsnorm vom Altertum zum Mittelalter', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 40 (1958), 1–65.

¹²C.P. Wormald, 'The uses of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and its neighbours', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, fifth series, 27 (1977), 95–114.

or region in relationship to the rest of Europe, as well as 'attitudes to literacy within and without the Church'.¹³

So what did this approach reveal to Wormald of the extent and nature of lay literacy in early medieval England, Francia, and Ireland? That it remained restricted to a clerical elite, and that thus the traditional view of early medieval lay illiteracy remained a valid one. But if Wormald's overall conclusion supported traditional views, his more sophisticated approach to the problem revealed some interesting patterns. To begin with, barbarian aristocratic males were largely illiterate not because they were unable to learn to read, but because they felt it beneath their dignity as warriors. On the other hand, aristocratic women, in the Germanic kingdoms at least, had a propensity for the cultivated sort of literacy which Parkes defined, and that literacy was, on the whole, Latin literacy. The restriction of literacy was, however, also aided by the clergy itself, not because they identified literacy as their exclusive preserve, as did the Hindu Brahmins discussed by Goody, but because 'the language of the western Church was uncompromisingly Latin', a state of affairs which 'the barbarians accepted, even defended'.¹⁴ As for Parkes' pragmatic and professional literacies of government and business, they remained largely in the province of the clergy, while lay aristocratic society continued, on the whole, to be founded on an oral mode of communication with an ideological component that put more faith in the spoken than the written. Finally, Wormald employed a functionalist methodology, borrowed from Goody, which took account of the ways in which literacy was used. Such an approach had the advantage not only of encouraging greater precision in the definition of medieval literacy, it also resisted the imposition of prescriptive categories.

Two years after Wormald's paper, the uses of literacy, this time in early Renaissance Venice and Florence, was the theme of J.K. Hyde's Royal Historical Society address.¹⁵ Hyde sought to trace the rise of vernacular literacy and literature in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy, not by turning to the usual heroes of this story, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, but by looking at 'the lower range of everyday writing through which the literate minority communicated for business and pleasure'.¹⁶ Italy, thanks to the greater continuity there with the imperial Roman past, had long maintained a relatively high degree of bureaucratic literacy through the use of notaries and Roman law. Yet this highly specialized and latinate literacy, like the literacy of the clergy, did not spread beyond the narrow bounds of its professional practitioners. The roots of a more widespread and vernacular literacy were rather to be found in the rise of commerce. When, in the middle of the thirteenth century, merchants began to stay home and send out their agents or younger partners to distant parts, it became necessary for them to conduct much of their business in writing, both in the way of letter writing and record keeping. Thus the exigencies of business

¹³Wormald, 'Uses of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England', 96-7.

¹⁴Wormald, 'Uses of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England', 99.

¹⁵J.K. Hyde, 'Some uses of literacy in Venice and Florence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, fifth series, 29 (1979), 109-28.

¹⁶Hyde, 'Uses of literacy in Venice and Florence', 112.

created a professionally literate merchant class. Nevertheless the cultural implications of this were not everywhere the same, even in the two largest commercial centres in the West, Florence and Venice; for while the production of Italian vernacular literature ended up flourishing in Trecento Florence, it remained largely moribund in its Adriatic rival. Hyde ascribed the rise of Florentine vernacular literature in large part to the propensity of merchants there for writing personal *ricordanze* of themselves and their families. And this, combined with the social mobility and political fluidity of the Florentine commune, created an eager and relatively large audience for the rhetorical studies emanating from Bologna and the translations of the Roman *auctores* that followed in its wake. In Venice, to the contrary, there was a greater dependence on priest-notaries, a preference among the upper levels of Venetian society for French literature, and a strong tradition of reverence for the state, as reflected and fostered by the writing of official state histories in Latin. And the monopoly of this official historiography would continue, even when historical writing shifted to the *volgare* in the mid-fourteenth century.

In the same year as Hyde's paper appeared, Michael Clanchy published the first comprehensive study of medieval literacy, *From memory to written record: England 1066–1307*.¹⁷ Though its regional focus was largely limited to England, this work broke new ground both in its chronological sweep and in the sheer amount of data which its author had assembled. Even more important for the historiography of medieval literacy, however, was Clanchy's open-minded attitude toward literacy and his inventive use of sources. He began, as did his predecessors of the 1960s in this field, with the notion that writing was a technology, but unlike them he shied away from their formalist assumptions about writing's power in and of itself to transform mental processes. Rather he characterized writing as a tool whose uses were developed over time in response to concrete needs. In England between the Norman Conquest and the death of King Edward I, these needs were primarily those of a centralizing government, whose initial reliance on the written word arose from the violent intrusion of a small group of north French warriors and clerics upon a resistant English populace. In the atmosphere of resentment and distrust which followed upon the Conquest, William and his curia began keeping records, a tool which Clanchy calls 'a product of distrust rather than social progress'.¹⁸ Over time, English royal government extended and refined its uses of writing, and this in turn forced its subjects to participate in literacy. Yet the advance of the written mode of communication and information storage proceeded haltingly, and even with reverses, for two reasons. First because it competed with older and far better established oral and memorial modes and habits. Thus people had to learn to trust writing. And this distrust of writing was not just due to thoughtless inertia, because sometimes writing proved itself to be a less adequate tool. For example, if the English government began keeping records with the Domesday Book, it could not effectively search its ever

¹⁷M.T. Clanchy, *From memory to written record. England, 1066–1307*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, MA, 1979; 2nd revised ed., Oxford, 1993).

¹⁸Clanchy, *Memory to written record*, 7.

growing mass of records until the early fourteenth century.¹⁹ Memory, then, was often far more useful than a written record. Moreover, as the considerable number of surviving forgeries from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries can attest, writing was itself often untrustworthy.²⁰

Still, methods were devised to correct for writing's shortcomings, and written instruments and records found their way into more and more aspects of government business as well as the day-to-day affairs of people's lives. By the early fourteenth century England had made the transition from a society whose habits of thought and notions of authority were largely oral and memorial to one based more on the written word, in which the lineaments of power in government were thoroughly literate and where even peasants were expected to have seals to authenticate documents. Finally, it had become a society based on practical literacy, where writing was no longer associated principally with the word of God in scripture and the sacred functions of religious worship.²¹ This marked a crucial shift in the ideology not only of writing but of language. A shift, which in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, would loosen writing from its largely Latin matrix and make possible the development of a vernacular written culture.

Clanchy's document-based, highly pragmatic attitude to literacy was nicely complemented by the theoretically sophisticated hermeneutic approach taken by Brian Stock in his *Implications of literacy*, published in 1983.²² Like Clanchy, Stock was sensitive to the complex interplay of spoken and written modes of communication and habits of thought. Yet Stock, whose chief aim was to reconstitute 'another society's system of communication on its own terms', was dissatisfied with the oral versus literate model which formed the basis of all previous studies.²³ Not only did this binary model tend, thanks to its modernist semantic baggage, towards a privileging of the written over the spoken, it was also an ineffectual intellectual tool for understanding a society in which 'written traditions were largely islands of higher culture in an environment that was not so much illiterate as nonliterate' and a period of time when the shift in the mode of communications 'was not so much from oral to written as from an earlier state, predominantly oral, to various combinations of oral and written'.²⁴ Stock's solution to this impasse was to configure a new framework of analysis, consisting of three terms: orality, literacy, and textuality. Now literacy constituted a middle term, defined not as a mode of communication but as an interpretive field which drew its subject matter, discursive practices, and ideology from textual and oral modes.²⁵

The importance of Stock's reconfigured model cannot be overstated. First it provided the formal framework for an explanation of cultural change in the Europe of

¹⁹Clanchy, *Memory to written record*, 116–47.

²⁰Clanchy, *Memory to written record*, 248–57.

²¹Clanchy, *Memory to written record*, 258–65.

²²B. Stock, *The Implications of literacy. Written language and models of interpretation in the eleventh and twelfth centuries* (Princeton, 1983).

²³Stock, *Implications*, 7.

²⁴Stock, *Implications*, 9. Italics Stock's.

²⁵Stock, *Implications*, 6–9.

the eleventh and twelfth centuries, whereby reading and writing were transformed from 'basic skills into instruments of analysis and interpretation'. The process by which this transformation occurred was a dialectical one in which written tradition extended 'into formerly oral sectors of life and thought' while oral tradition acculturated the written mode.²⁶ But what of the social spheres in which this process took place? On the one hand, it happened in the institutional settings of official culture, the cathedral schools, law courts, and the church service. But it also moved beyond the direct control of church and state in an ever-growing number of popular social milieus which Stock called 'textual communities', and defined as:

groups of people whose social activities are centred around texts, or, more precisely, around a literate interpreter of them. The text in question need not be written down nor the majority of auditors actually literate. The *interpretes* may relate it verbally, as did the medieval preacher. It may be lengthy . . . but more normally it is short enough that its essentials can be easily understood and remembered. . . . Moreover, the group's members must associate voluntarily; their interaction must take place around an agreed meaning for the text. Above all, they must make the hermeneutic leap from what the text says to what they think it means; the common understanding provides the foundation for changing thought and behaviour.²⁷

The textual community, then, is a group of people, each of whose members identify with the others not according to family, status, or locale, or at least not principally, but according to a common viewpoint as defined by a body of written texts. Their 'literacy', then, was not predicated on being able to read, but in their willingness to assign authority to texts and their ability to interpret the messages contained therein. Stock's novel concept not only offered an explanation of how non-readers can participate in a fairly sophisticated form of literacy, it also extended literacy of a more than practical nature beyond the exclusive realm of the elites. The textual community has proven itself to be a very useful descriptive term indeed, as has a modification on it, the 'discourse community'.²⁸

Less universally accepted has been Stock's claim that the growth of a literate mentality at the end of the eleventh and beginning of the twelfth century fostered a distinctly new kind of rationality, exemplified in new attitudes towards the sacraments and nature, language, and change.²⁹ The argument has not been so much with his description of these changing attitudes, since they seem to have been real enough. The disagreement stems rather from his assigning literacy as their cause, rather than growing numeracy and monetization, and a new kind of school curriculum designed to satisfy the ambition to get ahead on the part of clerics from middling or humble backgrounds, all factors argued for by Alexander Murray in his *Reason and society*

²⁶Stock, *Implications*, 9.

²⁷Stock, *Implications*, 522. See also Stock, *Listening for the text*, 16–29, 140–58.

²⁸R.N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c.1215–c.1525* (Cambridge, 1995), 9, 92.

²⁹Stock, *Implications*, 241–325, 326–454, 472–521.

in the Middle Ages.³⁰ Indeed Murray, like Clanchy, argued for the close connection between literacy and power, but from a different angle. For if Clanchy saw royal government as being the chief agent in the expansion and articulation of literate modes, Murray, in a sense, looked behind the institution, at the aims and ambitions of the clerks who staffed Europe's burgeoning bureaucracies. It was these 'knowledge workers' of the central Middle Ages who recognized the potential of reason, as expressed in numbers and texts, as a new and efficient means to power.³¹ Another important consideration, as far as the literacy of the central Middle Ages is concerned, is the role of the vernacular, which Franz Bäuml classified as a mode of communication originally (that is before the twelfth century) associated with orality and illiteracy, in contradistinction to the literate mode of Latin. Bäuml, who like Stock characterized the 'horizon of expectation' associated with Latin literacy as 'metaphorical and "abstract"', and that of vernacular illiteracy as 'unmetaphorical and "concrete"', went on to argue that the new written vernacular literatures, informed as they were by this oral 'horizon of expectation', 'demetaphorized' narrative, thereby creating 'ambiguity in the delimitations of intra- and extra-textual "reality"'. Thus vernacular literature created a new category of reception, which we call 'fiction', a narratologically constituted 'reality' inhabiting the space between 'truth' and 'falsehood'.³²

Taken together, the work of Clanchy, Stock, Murray, and Bäuml presented compelling evidence and conceptual frameworks for understanding the astonishing developments in bureaucratic power, rationality, and the types and extent of literate modes and literature during the period roughly from 1050 to 1300. Nevertheless all these authors operated on the tacit assumption that the decades around the year 1100 marked a distinct rupture between an early medieval European culture which was predominantly non-literate, with the exception of the latinate clerical elite, and a High medieval culture of literacy. What had previously been a view of the history of literacy which saw the entire Middle Ages as a trough between the literate worlds of antiquity and the Renaissance, was replaced by one in which the trough had been narrowed to the roughly five centuries after the disintegration of the western Roman Empire. In 1989–1990 a group of early medievalists, led by Rosamond McKitterick, a historian of Carolingian Francia, launched a headlong assault on these notions in McKitterick's monograph *The Carolingians and the written word*, and a collection of essays which she edited, *The uses of literacy in early medieval Europe*.³³ In the place of this history of ruptures, wherein the culture of literacy died and was reborn,

³⁰A. Murray, *Reason and society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1978). For criticism of Stock and others who assume literacy as a generalized causative factor in cultural change, see especially Joyce Coleman, *Public reading and the reading public in late medieval England and France* (Cambridge, 1996), 1–33.

³¹Murray, *Reason and society*, 213–314.

³²F. Bäuml, 'Varieties and consequences of medieval literacy and illiteracy', *Speculum*, 55 (1980), 239–65; esp. 239, 244, 246, 263–5. I have supplied H.R. Jauss's term 'horizon of expectations'. On this see Paul de Man's 'Introduction' to H.R. Jauss, *Toward an aesthetic of reception*, trans. T. Bahti (Minneapolis, 1982), xi–xii.

³³R. McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the written word* (Cambridge, 1989); *The uses of literacy in early medieval Europe*, ed. R. McKitterick (Cambridge, 1990).

they substituted one of continuity and gradual evolution between late antiquity and the central Middle Ages.

In her monograph, McKitterick assembles an impressive body of documentary and codicological evidence to show that the uses of literacy in Carolingian Francia were many and varied, especially when it came to the exercise of the law and property rights, and that even if the Frankish Church was the primary agent behind these practices, the lay nobility actively participated in them and indeed demanded them. But the nobility not only participated in literacy, a high proportion of them also could read and even write. They could do so for two reasons. First, the rise of the Germanic kingdoms did not spell the doom of lay education, and even if the focus of the curriculum was no longer on the rhetorical arts of antiquity, the schools in Francia, whether institutional or private, still taught the skills of reading and writing, as well as some appreciation for classical, not to mention Christian, literature. Nor was illiteracy or semi-literacy substantially greater among the masses in the Frankish kingdoms than it had been during the Roman Empire.³⁴ Second, even if what was being written and read was in Latin, this was not the obstacle previously assumed by historians, since for the Merovingians and Carolingians Latin was merely the written form of what they spoke, rather than a separate language. In other words, as Roger Wright has stated the case, the language spoken by the Germans who lived in the former Roman provinces was in fact Latin.³⁵ Certainly it sounded and was constructed somewhat differently from written Latin, but this was more a difference of register than of language. As for the inhabitants of the German-speaking lands of the Frankish empire, the members of the aristocratic and clerical elites would have learned this spoken language as a second language, so they too would not have found written Latin incomprehensible.³⁶

McKitterick did not just assert the practical literacy of the upper ranks of the Frankish laity, however. She also assembled a considerable body of evidence pointing to their involvement in a bookish 'cultivated' literacy. Frankish aristocrats not only read books, they bought and commissioned manuscripts, and patronized literary production. Some had their own collections of books, others had access to them in the ecclesiastical or monastic foundations with which they were associated. Their piety, moreover, was a literate piety: 'Through the medium of the written word, lay devotion was shaped. Through the gifts of books to churches, lay support of the church was symbolized.'³⁷ Given this widespread and well-established culture of literacy, the literary accomplishments of Frankish laypeople like Einhard and Dhuoda, though still impressive in their own right, seem less exceptional.

How exceptional or typical the Carolingian uses of literacy were in medieval Europe is examined in the essays of the several contributors to McKitterick's edited

³⁴McKitterick, *Carolingians*, 77–134, 211–73; W.V. Harris, *Ancient literacy* (Cambridge, MA, 1989).

³⁵R. Wright, *Late Latin and early Romance in Spain and Carolingian France* (Liverpool, 1982); *Latin and the Romance languages in the early Middle Ages*, ed. R. Wright (London, 1991; repr., University Park, PA, 1996).

³⁶McKitterick, *Carolingians*, 22.

³⁷McKitterick, *Carolingians*, 270.

volume. As for the Franks themselves, Ian Wood argues that the levels of education and literacy among the ruling elites of Merovingian Gaul was very high indeed, at least until the middle of the seventh century. Thus the achievements of the first Carolingians, with regard to the uses of literacy, seem to have been not so much novelties but revivals of Merovingian practices.³⁸ Moreover, the Carolingians' uses of literacy were not merely practical but also symbolic, whether as a means of identifying institutions with the prestige of the Roman past and the sacredness of scripture (John Mitchell), as a sign of membership in the Carolingian elites and among the king's loyal and free men (Janet Nelson), or simply as an expression of faith, knowledge, and power (McKitterick).³⁹ Yet if the Carolingians seem to have been particularly avid and self-conscious deployers of the written word, they were certainly not the only ones among the inheritors of the Roman and Christian legacy to do so. Indeed, papal government, the most direct heir to imperial Roman ways of doing business, was so wedded to the use of writing that, as Thomas F.X. Noble puts it, 'in papal Rome one proceeded from written record to memory'.⁴⁰ Albeit most of this literacy was confined to the clergy, but the sheer output of documents addressed to laymen in Rome and its environs has prompted Noble 'to infer that some degree of lay literacy was present'.⁴¹ In Visigothic Spain, according to Roger Collins, the upper ranks of society also appear to have been keen users of literacy, of both the practical and cultivated variety.⁴² After the Arab conquest of the early eighth century, this relatively high level of literacy seems to have continued in the Arab-dominated portions of Spain, though by the beginning of the tenth century the language of literacy among Christians seems to have shifted from Latin to Arabic. As for the Christians of the north, the evidence points to a shift towards a more restricted literacy practised by the clergy. Still some of the nobility show signs of being highly literate, while several lay judges also evince literate skills which they appear to have learned in monastic schools.⁴³ Even in Anglo-Saxon England, where the rupture with the Roman past was most pronounced, some level of literacy appears to have been attained in monastic schools by some of the sons of the nobility. Yet, unlike Spain, Italy, and Francia, where Latin held sway as the language of literacy, in England, says Susan Kelly, 'Latin was so remote from the secular side of society that greater use had to be made of the vernacular in all areas of administration and social regulation.' Thus, when Alfred the Great launched his programme of lay education at the end of the ninth century, he 'did not initiate the use of vernacular writing' but instead 'attempted to enlarge the scope of books available in English'.⁴⁴ After Alfred, according to Simon Keynes, the English came to rely more and more on written documentation, both English and Latin, in the form of charters, wills, writs, and law codes. And though he does not deny that the weight of authority still rested on the

³⁸*Uses of literacy*, 63–81.

³⁹*Uses of literacy*, 186–225, 258–96, 297–318.

⁴⁰*Uses of literacy*, 98.

⁴¹*Uses of literacy*, 104.

⁴²*Uses of literacy*, 114–18.

⁴³*Uses of literacy*, 122–32.

⁴⁴*Uses of literacy*, 57, 62.

spoken word, when it came to all aspects of the law, the written word nevertheless came to be seen as its essential concomitant.⁴⁵

The early medievalists have made a strong case, then, for a culture based on literacy, at least among the clergy and the upper ranks of the laity, in the societies they have studied. This, in turn, has modified our overall model of literacy's fortunes in the Middle Ages, from that of rapid decline in the period after the barbarian invasions, followed half a millennium later by an equally dramatic rebirth, to one of continuity punctuated by periods of acceleration. Important changes, some gradual and some rather sudden, did nevertheless occur in the extent, nature, form, and uses of writing and reading during the medieval centuries, and the scholarship devoted to describing and theorizing these has also proliferated in the last three decades. This work falls roughly into two categories. On the one hand are the studies growing out of the constellation of specialized disciplines related to the history of the text-in-manuscript, palaeography, codicology, and the history of texts; on the other are those which apply the lessons of critical theory to medieval texts. This second kind of history has spawned interesting and thought-provoking studies, like those of Rita Copeland's *Rhetoric, hermeneutics and translation*, Gabrielle Spiegel's *Romancing the past*, and Brian Stock's *Augustine the reader*.⁴⁶ While the hermeneutic approach of these authors makes their work daunting reading for many historians, each raises issues of significance for the fields of cultural and intellectual history. Copeland and Stock, for example, both challenge the model of continuity between antiquity and the early Middle Ages by exposing important developments in the patristic period, like Jerome's and Augustine's fundamental restructurings of the theory of translation (Copeland) and Augustine's working out of a Christian theory of reading (Stock). Both Copeland and Spiegel, moreover, take a serious look at the role the vernacular played in cultural change. For Copeland, the translation of learned texts into the vernacular constituted a hermeneutic performance whose goal was appropriation of academic culture through the transfer of authority from the original Latin texts to the translated versions, or indeed to the translators themselves. Spiegel, who is a historian by discipline, argues that the initiation of vernacular prose historical writing in northern France around the year 1200 was part of the pro-Angevin Flemish nobility's response to the crisis of growing Capetian power. The linear narrative of these histories reinforced the legitimacy of their noble patron's lineage, while their composition in prose, rather than verse, constituted an assertion of these works' truth claims.

Texts, of course, are not only governed by theoretical concerns. They also respond to more mundane forces, such as the availability and types of writing materials, the competence of scribes, and an enormous range of practical and ideological needs on the part of their composers and users. The description and analysis of these factors

⁴⁵*Uses of literacy*, 226–57.

⁴⁶R. Copeland, *Rhetoric, hermeneutics and translation in the Middle Ages. Academic traditions vernacular texts* (Cambridge, 1991); G.M. Spiegel, *Romancing the past. The rise of vernacular prose historiography in thirteenth-century France* (Berkeley, 1993); B. Stock, *Augustine the reader. Meditation, self-knowledge, and the ethics of interpretation* (Cambridge, MA, 1996).

fall within the purview of scholars devoted to manuscript studies, whose principal objects of study are all the physical survivals of things written or directly related to the activities of writing and reading. Manuscript studies is a blanket term for a constellation of approaches to these artefacts. First is the codicological approach, whose principal interest is in what might be called the material aspects of these artefacts. Closely related to this is the palaeographical-diplomatic approach, to whose traditional aims of identifying, classifying, and dating scripts and the manuscripts and documents in which they are contained has been added the endeavour to study writing as both an expression of culture and a culturally productive activity. The third approach concerns itself with the formal aspects of texts and their situation in manuscripts. Fourth and finally are the attempts to reconstruct medieval libraries, both in terms of their architecture and furnishings and of their contents, through the examination of surviving catalogues and inventories, on the one hand, and of the origin and provenance of surviving manuscript books, on the other.

The output in the field of manuscript studies has been astonishingly prolific over the past three decades, so much so that it would be a fool's errand to attempt a survey here. Nevertheless the work of certain scholars can be singled out as having particularly broad implications for an understanding of the written culture of the medieval west. Perhaps no one has more assiduously studied written culture than the Italian palaeographer Armando Petrucci.⁴⁷ While his main region of expertise is northern and central Italy, his interest in writing is otherwise boundless. All writing is fair game, whether it be found in books, documents, or monumental inscriptions, on seals, jewels, or coins. This catholicity is complemented by a chronological breadth that stretches from late antiquity to the Renaissance. In contrast to the picture of overall continuity presented by the historians of early medieval literacy discussed earlier in this article, Petrucci stresses the discontinuities and novelties that attended the rise of Christianity and the incursions of barbarians from the fourth to the seventh centuries. To begin with, the book itself was reconceptualized in a number of ways. It went from being a repository of one or more unified works to a container of heterogeneous miscellaneous texts. This resulted, at the practical level, from a need to preserve, 'a large number of texts in a restricted and poorly equipped space', which reconstituted the book as 'a library without a library'.⁴⁸ There was also an ideological aspect to this, however, whereby the first miscellaneous books 'corresponded to a conception of texts that was both global and hierarchical, in whose circle the individual textual segments, rather than being considered autonomous, were seen as parts of a whole, belonging to a textual stream neither interrupted nor interruptible: a conception quite typical of Christian written culture'.⁴⁹ This kind of book, originally restricted to religious communities in Egypt, may have then made its way

⁴⁷Several of his articles and essays have been collected and translated in A. Petrucci, *Writers and readers in medieval Italy. Studies in the history of written culture*, ed. and trans. by C.M. Radding (New Haven, 1995).

⁴⁸A. Petrucci, 'From the unitary book to the miscellany', in: *Writers and readers*, 8. Originally published as: 'Dal libro unitario al libro miscellaneo', in: *Società romana e impero tardoantico*, vol. 4. *Tradizioni dei classici trasformazioni della cultura*, ed. A. Giardina (Bari, 1986), 173–87, 271–4.

⁴⁹Petrucci, 'Unitary book', 9.

to Ireland, from where, apparently, it was introduced to the continent through the agency of Irish *peregrini* during the seventh century.⁵⁰

The changing notion of the book as container also functioned at the symbolic level, as exemplified in the iconography of the scriptures, which went in the seventh century from being represented as an open book on which the Word was displayed to a closed and ornamented one. This, says Petrucci, was part of an 'ideological process of sacralization' wherein 'the book itself had gradually been transformed from an instrument of writing and reading, to be used and thus open, into an object of adoration and a jewel-box of mysteries, not to be used directly and thus closed'.⁵¹ All these changes resulted in part from the exigencies brought about by the triumph of a religion of the book that now functioned in a society wherein the vast majority of the faithful were either illiterate or semi-literate. Not only the book but writing itself came to be seen differently at this time. In the case of sacred texts, this was due partly to a sacralization of the letter, which was akin to the changes taking place in the conception of the book. Yet an even more profound shift resulted from a 'conception that saw writing not as in the service of reading but as an end in itself', which in turn opened a gap 'between practices of writing and practices of reading' and relegated the task of writing to semi-literate scribes 'who paid little attention to the needs of reading—or of readers'.⁵²

While Christianity had something to do with these changes, Petrucci believes that a far more important factor, as far as Italy was concerned, was the devastation wrought by the Gothic Wars followed by the invasion of the Lombards who, unlike the Ostrogoths, cared little at first for the legacy of Roman antiquity with its literacy and classical education. For Petrucci, then, it was the break with the classical past, in Italy, but also to greater or lesser extent in the rest of the old western Roman Empire, that began a process by which 'the models and conditions of reading usual in late antiquity were radically transformed during the Middle Ages'.⁵³ But if Italian libraries provided many of the late antique exemplars which would serve as textual fodder for the next phase of this radical transformation, the changes themselves originated in the Irish and Anglo-Saxon monasteries of the seventh and eighth centuries. For it was there that the hiatus between writing and reading began to be bridged by monks and nuns whose mother tongues were utterly alien from the Latin of Christianity.

Unlike the monastic and other scribes in Romance speaking lands, for whom Latin was simply the written register of the language they themselves spoke, the scribes in England and Ireland had to learn their Latin grammatically. This meant that they 'tended to regard Latin primarily as a written or "visible" language used for transmit-

⁵⁰Petrucci, 'Unitary book', 16–17.

⁵¹A. Petrucci, 'The Christian conception of the book in the sixth and seventh centuries', in: *Writers and readers*, 29. Originally published as: 'La concezione cristiana del libro', *Studi medievali*, third series, 14 (1973), 961–84.

⁵²Petrucci, 'Christian conception', 32–3; and A. Petrucci, 'Reading in the Middle Ages', in: *Writers and readers*, 134–5. Originally published as: 'Lire au Moyen Age', *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome*, 96 (1984), 603–16.

⁵³Petrucci, 'Reading', in: *Writers and readers*, 132.

ting texts'.⁵⁴ It also meant that they approached writing as readers, and as readers, moreover, who were acutely aware of grammatical structures. In consequence, these scribes began to develop a 'grammar of legibility', which the term's originator, Malcolm Parkes, defines as 'a kind of decorum' governing a complex of graphic conventions developed 'in order both to improve the intelligibility of minuscule scripts, and to facilitate access to the information transmitted in the written medium'. The constituent elements of the grammar of legibility—letter forms, *litterae notabiliores*, word-spacing, punctuation, page layout—had to operate in relation to one another in a precisely defined way 'if they were to perform adequately their role in that process of "disambiguating" which is essential to the comprehension of either written or spoken language'.⁵⁵ Yet the grammar of legibility also had ideological and political implications. The innovations of the Anglo-Saxons, for example, had a great deal to do with their profound respect for the Roman Christian heritage bequeathed to them by Gregory the Great.⁵⁶ Moreover, as David Ganz has shown, Charlemagne, Louis the Pious, and their counsellors seized on these insular innovations as well as on the highly legible and disciplined Caroline minuscule script, originally devised at Corbie, and encouraged their further development and spread in order to promote a standardized, and unifying, Romano-Christian culture in their empire.⁵⁷

The developments and effects of punctuation and word separation over the *longue durée* have been traced, respectively, by Parkes and Paul Saenger. In *Pause and effect*, Parkes focuses on the practice of punctuation rather than theoretical discussions of it, because only in so doing can he show how the functions and shapes of symbols changed, not only over time, but depending on individual choice.⁵⁸ The importance of this book for the history of literacy, reading, and writing is considerable, since it elucidates how the development of punctuation 'coincided with changing patterns of literacy, whereby new generations of readers in different historical situations imposed new demands on the written medium itself' and with 'developments in traditional attitudes to discourse'.⁵⁹ For Parkes, important changes in the function of punctuation occurred in the fifth and sixth centuries. Prior to this time texts had been written largely free of punctuation or word separation in keeping with the expectations of readers trained in the art of Roman rhetoric. Writing, for them, was to be in the most neutral form possible, since it was the responsibility of the

⁵⁴M. Parkes, 'The contribution of Insular scribes of the seventh and eighth centuries to the "Grammar of Legibility"', in: Parkes, *Scribes, scripts and readers*, 2. Originally published in: *Grafia e interpunzione del latino nel medioevo* (Rome, 1987), 15–29.

⁵⁵Parkes, 'Contribution of Insular scribes', 1–2.

⁵⁶Parkes, 'Contributions of Insular scribes', 12.

⁵⁷D. Ganz, 'The preconditions for Caroline minuscule', *Viator*, 18 (1987), 23–44; D. Ganz, 'Book production in the Carolingian Empire and the spread of Caroline minuscule' in: *The New Cambridge medieval history. Volume II, c.700–c.900*, ed. R. McKitterick (Cambridge, 1995), 786–808. Though see also the comments of R. McKitterick, 'Script and book production': in *Carolingian culture. Emulation and innovation*, ed. R. McKitterick (Cambridge, 1994), 221–47. Ganz's work, as that of any scholar of Carolingian reading and writing, owes much to the seminal studies of Bernhard Bischoff. See, for example, B. Bischoff, *Manuscripts and Libraries in the Age of Charlemagne*, trans. and ed. M. Gorman (Cambridge, 1994).

⁵⁸M.B. Parkes, *Pause and effect. An introduction to the history of punctuation in the West* (Berkeley, 1993), 2–6.

⁵⁹Parkes, *Pause and effect*, 2–3.

reader, declaiming aloud, to divine the rhythms of the *cursus* which signalled the formulaic *clausulae* marking the major divisions, or *cola* and *periodi*, of the discourse. But the decline of Roman rhetorical education coupled, on the one hand, with the aims of a Church which needed unambiguously to transmit doctrine to all and sundry, and, on the other, with a shift away from reading aloud to reading silently, created both a need for punctuation and an expectation that that punctuation would be provided by the scribe.⁶⁰ Over time punctuation not only became more refined, it also tended towards a greater degree of standardization, thanks to such factors as the Carolingian renaissance, the rise of the universities, and, finally, the invention of the moveable-type printing press.⁶¹

According to Saenger, in *Space between words*, the shift from reading aloud to silent reading was not only important, it was the single most important change in the history of reading in the West between the invention of the codex and that of the printing press.⁶² Saenger's most important methodological innovation has been to subject the medieval evidence to concepts derived from research on the physiology and psychology of reading. He is thereby able to apply certain norms of reading that function regardless of time or place. For example, in any culture, the preference for either purely visual silent reading or oral reading is separated by a certain 'threshold in the duration of cognitive activity needed to achieve lexical access in that culture's script', with the shorter duration favouring silent, and the longer, oral reading. In Western alphabetic script, this duration is reduced by easy identification of word shape ('Bouma shape') and by efficient inter-character and inter-word spacing.⁶³ By combining these physio-psychological principles with an exhaustive examination of hundreds of surviving manuscripts, Saenger has been able to trace the history of word separation in Europe, from the unseparated *scriptura continua* of antiquity, to the writing *per cola et commata* or with punctuation by space of the patristic period, to the medieval developments of aerated, irregularly separated, and finally fully separated script.⁶⁴

Far from being the result of some kind of technological determinism, however, these changes in writing and reading practices were responses to specific historical circumstances. Word separation first arose in an Insular context largely to help the monks' there comprehend Latin, an entirely foreign language which they had to learn grammatically. This same desire for ready comprehension also inspired Insular grammarians to substitute grammatical for rhetorical word order.⁶⁵ Yet word separation had the added benefit of facilitating reading aloud in the refined manner of the ancients, without having to undergo the same 'prolonged and arduous grammatical apprenticeship'.⁶⁶ Despite the apparent advantages of full word separation, however, most continental scriptoria did not adopt it immediately upon its introduction there

⁶⁰Parkes, *Pause and effect*, 9–19.

⁶¹Parkes, *Pause and effect*, 30–61.

⁶²P. Saenger, *Space between words. The origins of silent reading* (Stanford, 1997), 20–1.

⁶³Saenger, *Space between words*, 2, 6–7, 18–30.

⁶⁴Saenger, *Space between words*, 30–51.

⁶⁵Saenger, *Space between words*, 90.

⁶⁶Saenger, *Space between words*, 85.

by Alcuin *c.*800. Instead they devised a hybrid of it and *scriptura continua*, which Saenger calls ‘aerated script written in hierarchical word blocks’.⁶⁷ Yet, if aerated script held sway in those areas of the continent where Romance was spoken and/or where Carolingian influence was particularly strong, other areas, like Celtic Brittany and the German-speaking lands of central and southern Germany, quickly adopted full word separation. It would only be after the middle of the tenth century that the continent as a whole accepted full word separation, a decision which Saenger says was the result of the growing alienation of Romance from Latin and the demands posed by new kinds of academic texts.⁶⁸

Silent reading and word separation were to be two of the essential ingredients in the radical transformation of written culture which attended the growth during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of the universities and such new religious orders as the Cistercians, canons regular, and mendicant friars. Silent reading was integral in the new kind of meditative reading engaged in by the Cistercians, but it was also a necessary precondition for the development of new techniques and tools for the rapid copying, consultation, and use of an ever-growing body of texts associated with the proliferating curriculum of the universities.⁶⁹ These changes have received considerable attention of late. Parkes, in an important article published in 1976, argued that new attitudes towards the ordering and compiling of texts marked a shift from the slow, meditative, and often oral monastic *lectio*, to the new ratiocinative and pragmatic reading of the schools and mendicant orders.⁷⁰ When thinking became a craft, it became clear that different fields of study required their ‘own appropriate mode of procedure’ and texts that were organized accordingly.⁷¹ Thus such devices as running-titles, chapter headings, initials, paraph marks, and *signes-de-renvoi* began to be employed in a disciplined, regular manner, while new tools like concordances, analytical tables of contents, alphabetical indexes, and compilations of extracts were devised for the needs of teachers, students, and professionals, from canon lawyers to preachers. The end result was not only a battery of new kinds of texts and apparatuses, but a new kind of book, the late medieval book, which ‘differs more from its early medieval predecessors than it does from the printed books of our own day’.⁷²

These new attitudes towards reading and the role of the book grew out of important historical developments, like Church reform and the attendant growth of papal government, on the one hand, and of towns and popular heresy, on the other. In response to these new developments, theologians and canon lawyers not only glossed their Bibles and *Sentences*, and copies of the *Decretum* and Decretals, they also experimented with page layout in order to maximize the readability of these glosses—a process reconstructed, in the case of the Bible and *Sentences* by Chris-

⁶⁷Saenger, *Space between words*, 100.

⁶⁸Saenger, *Space between words*, 120–30.

⁶⁹Saenger, *Space between words*, 243–55.

⁷⁰M.B. Parkes, ‘The influence of the concepts of *ordinatio* and *compilatio* on the development of the book’, in: *Medieval learning and literature. Essays presented to Richard William Hunt*, ed. J.J.G. Alexander and M.T. Gibson (Oxford, 1976), 115–41, pls. 8–1, repr. in: Parkes, *Scribes, scripts and readers*, essay 3.

⁷¹Parkes, ‘Influence’, 117–20.

⁷²Parkes, ‘Influence’, 135.

topher de Hamel.⁷³ Mary and Richard Rouse have shown how even more radical changes resulted from the needs of preachers who, faced with the requirement to preach sermons to the faithful and combat heresy, broke with the long medieval tradition of observing the 'rational' order of texts, and instead 'plundered' *exempla* and authorities from their *originalia* and inserted them into alphabetized *compendia*.⁷⁴ Most of these innovations occurred either in the setting of Europe's new universities or in that of the *studia* of the mendicant orders. Of course, the growth of schools and their curricula brought about an exponential increase in the demand for books, beginning in the latter part of the twelfth century. Only in the 1980s, however, did a clear picture begin to emerge of the material and technological aspects of book production. In 1980 and 1983 Carla Bozzolo and Ezio Ornato together published the results of their quantitative study of manuscript book production in France from the ninth through to the fifteenth centuries.⁷⁵ Besides considering the fluctuations in the overall pattern of production—an astonishing acceleration of book production during the thirteenth century, followed by a slight tapering off in the fourteenth, and a rapid increase in the fifteenth—they also looked at trends in variables such as book prices (broken down into material and labour costs), scribal productivity, material support (parchment vs. paper), book dimensions, construction of quires, disposition of text (long lines or double columns), and language (Latin or vernacular). The production of university books and the university book trade were the subject of a collection of essays published in 1988, while developments in rapid writing, note-taking, and book provision have been examined by Malcolm Parkes and Charles Burnett.⁷⁶

The general impression left by these studies is that as far as books are concerned, medieval society was capable of astonishing ingenuity when it came to the organization of labour, use of materials, and adaptation of writing techniques. They also lay to rest certain misconceptions perpetrated by earlier works on print culture such as, for example, that any significant use of alphabetical indexes had to await the invention of printing, that books produced prior to printing were inevitably riddled with errors, and that book production as a large-scale commercial activity was non-existent before printing.⁷⁷ Indeed, it is now claimed that the innovations in the production

⁷³C.F.R. de Hamel, *Glossed books of the Bible and the origins of the Paris booktrade* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1984).

⁷⁴R.H. Rouse and M.A. Rouse, *Preachers, florilegia and sermons. Studies on the Manipulus florum of Thomas of Ireland* (Toronto, 1979); M.A. Rouse and R.H. Rouse, *Authentic witnesses. Approaches to medieval texts and manuscripts* (Notre Dame, IN, 1991).

⁷⁵C. Bozzolo and E. Ornato, *Pour une histoire du livre manuscrit au Moyen Age. Trois essais de codicologie quantitative* (Paris, 1980; repr. with supplement, Paris, 1983).

⁷⁶*La production du livre universitaire au Moyen Age*, ed. L.J. Bataillon, B.G. Guyot, and R.H. Rouse (Paris, 1988); M.B. Parkes, 'Tachygraphy in the Middle Ages. Writing techniques employed for *reportationes* of lectures and sermons', *Medioevo e Rinascimento*, 3 (1989), 159–69, repr. in: Parkes, *Scribes, scripts and readers*, essay 2; M.B. Parkes, 'The provision of books', in: *The history of the University of Oxford. Volume II, late medieval Oxford*, ed. J.I. Catto and R. Evans (Oxford, 1992), 407–83; C. Burnett, 'Notes and note-taking in the universities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries', *History of the Universities*.

⁷⁷Such views can be found in E. Eisenstein, *The printing press as a agent of change. Communications and cultural transformations in early-modern Europe*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1979) and in Ong, *Orality and literacy. The technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982).

and use of learned texts during the central and later Middle Ages caused profound changes in habits of thought among those associated with them. Chief among these are a shift ‘from memory to artificial finding devices’ and from the retention of aural memories of specific sequences of sounds to a more generalized remembering of the sense of a text, and, even more important perhaps, the creation of a new conception of the text, the ‘bookish text’ which Ivan Illich defines as an ‘objectified’ text, detached from its physical setting in the book, ‘a figment on the face of the book that lifted off into autonomous existence’. As such, the text replaced ‘the world’ as the primary object of exegesis and hermeneutics.⁷⁸ Finally, the expansion and articulation of written culture in the schools and professions complemented, and had connections with, the rise of documentary bureaucratic literacy narrated by Clanchy. Together these contributed and helped shape one of the most important developments of the later Middle Ages, the growth of lay vernacular literacy.⁷⁹

By the beginning of the fourteenth century, the combined advances in the academic and administrative uses of literacy had greatly increased the effectiveness of writing as an instrument of power. The chief beneficiaries of these developments were the centralizing bureaucracies of the Church and Europe’s incipient nation-states. But writing, as employed in the service of Church and state, also had its victims, as James Given and Richard F. Green have recently shown. In his study of the Inquisition in early fourteenth-century Languedoc, Given dedicates the entire first chapter to describing the inquisitors ‘technology of documentation’.⁸⁰ He argues that this documentation was not only copious and thorough, but that their compilers, who were for the most part Dominican friars, used ‘some of the techniques developed by the schoolmen’, in order to ‘make the contents of their records readily retrievable by and comprehensible to future users’.⁸¹ In the hands of the inquisitors, these records were a powerful coercive device that allowed them to gather together disparate utterances made by those they interrogated, words that ‘were often veiled, misleading, and obscure’, and then reshape them ‘so as to reveal the damning “truth” that they believed lay hidden within’.⁸² Green’s *A crisis of truth. Literature and law in Ricardian England*, is the story of one of literacy’s most tragic victims, ethical truth. In fourteenth-century England, the common law was the chief agent of this ‘erosion of faith once placed in human beings’ (what Green calls ‘trouthe’) and its replacement by a faith in truth as externalized verifiable fact. The law, with its ‘increasing reliance on written records forced people to confront not only the fallibility of human memory

⁷⁸Rouse and Rouse, *Authentic Witnesses*, 192; Saenger, *Space between words*, 254; I. Illich, *In the vineyard of the text. A commentary to Hugh’s Didascalicon* (Chicago, 1993), 117–19.

⁷⁹Janet Coleman, *Medieval Readers and Writers, 1350–1400* (New York, 1981); S. Lusignan, *Parler vulgairement. Les intellectuels et la langue française aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles* (Montreal, 1987); F. Somerset, *Clerical discourse and lay audience in late medieval England* (Cambridge, 1998); C.F. Briggs, *Giles of Rome’s De regimine principum. Reading and writing politics at court and university, c.1275–c.1525* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁸⁰J.B. Given, *Inquisition and medieval society. Power, discipline, and resistance in Languedoc* (Ithaca, 1997), 25–51.

⁸¹Given, *Inquisition*, 28–9.

⁸²Given, *Inquisition*, 50–1.

but, far more traumatically, the unreliability of *trouthe*.⁸³ Yet that law should not be seen as something imposed entirely from without, since it was people's participation in it, either as officers of the court, or as witnesses, plaintiffs, and defendants, that guaranteed that the kind of literate habits gained by the laity during the course of the fourteenth century tied their vernacular literacy to a respect for the 'processes of verification and authentication'.⁸⁴

The tensions attendant upon the shift from oral to written processes help to explain a number of the crises that rocked later fourteenth-century England. Resentment against the encroachments of the documentary novelties of the common law can be seen as one of the primary motivations behind the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, while a good bit of the poisonous political climate of the 1380s and 1390s can be assigned to the struggle between two political orders holding rival concepts of treason.⁸⁵ Ranged on the one side were the king and his judiciary, who were in the midst of redefining treason in keeping with written practices as 'any challenge against the king's sovereignty'. On the other were the king's aristocratic enemies, who held to an older 'personal' definition of treason as the covert breaking of one's word.⁸⁶ According to Green, even Wyclif's and the Lollards' rejection of the eucharistic doctrine of transubstantiation may well be a product of the spread of a literate mentality. Citing Ong's statement that 'writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for "objectivity", in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing', Green contends that 'without the spread of vernacular literacy it is very doubtful that Lollardy could have made any headway in its campaign against an epistemology which, in its refusal to distinguish between signifier and signified, had provided, as [Miri] Rubin notes, "the basis for sacramentality"'.⁸⁷ Thus almost three centuries after Berengar of Tours had first challenged the non-rational conception of the eucharist, literate habits of mind had spread sufficiently that a substantial number of people were no longer 'able to ignore the uncomfortable fact that experience had now become "separable, if not always separated, from ratiocination about it"'.⁸⁸ Perhaps the roots of the Lollards' scriptural fundamentalism may also be sought in a literal-mindedness fostered by the spread of vernacular literacy.

As the example of the Lollards and other popular heretical groups, such as the Waldensians and Hussites, show us, literacy was not only an instrument of state and ecclesiastical control; whether in the form of reading and writing or as disseminated through preaching to the membership of a textual community, it could also create community and resist the encroachments of 'official' culture.⁸⁹ Indeed, as Steven

⁸³R.F. Green, *A crisis of truth. Literature and law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia, 1999), 13–19, 24–31, 39.

⁸⁴Green, *Crisis*, 40.

⁸⁵Green, *Crisis*, 198–205.

⁸⁶Green, *Crisis*, 206–21.

⁸⁷Green, *Crisis*, 284–85; Ong, *Orality and literacy*, 46; M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi. The Eucharist in late medieval culture* (Cambridge, 1991), 329.

⁸⁸Green, *Crisis*, 289 (quoting Stock, *Implications*, 531).

⁸⁹M. Aston, 'Lollardy and literacy', *History*, 62 (1977), 347–71, repr. in: M. Aston, *Lollards and reformers. Images and literacy in late medieval religion* (London, 1984), essay 6; A. Hudson, *The premature Reformation. Wycliffite texts and Lollard history* (Oxford, 1988); and the essays in *Heresy and literacy, 1000–1530*, ed. P. Biller and A. Hudson (Cambridge, 1994).

Justice has recently argued, even a movement as seemingly anti-literate as the Peasants' Revolt could well have been motivated not by hostility *against* the written word but by a desire on the part of the rebels to reform what they saw as the abuses of it: 'The rebels aimed not to destroy the documentary culture of feudal tenure and royal government, but to re-create it.'⁹⁰ They could hold this view of writing because they were, in fact, far more familiar with, and respectful of, official uses of literacy than historians, from the time of contemporary chroniclers to the present, have been able to recognize. The basis for Justice's bold claim is a set of six brief texts found in the contemporary chronicles of Henry Knighton and Thomas Walsingham. Of the five that appear in Knighton's chronicle, two claim to be letters by one of the rebels' leaders, the priest John Ball. As for the three others, Knighton assumed that these are reported speeches, rather than letters, since those responsible for them identify themselves as rustics. Yet Justice makes a plausible case for all three of these having been separately composed *letters*.⁹¹ Moreover, these letters show signs of familiarity with the formulae of government documents, the ideas of Wyclif, and passages of *Piers Plowman*.⁹² From here, he goes on to identify several other examples of the rebels' awareness of and participation in written culture. The insurgents of 1381 were not, then, the brutish, mindless rustics whom the chroniclers and other representatives of official culture perceived and wanted to record for posterity. Instead they were men and women fully cognizant of how writing could be used both to oppress people and to liberate them, depending on whether it was employed in the service of falsehood or truth.⁹³ Albeit very few of them were literate in the sense of being able to read and write Latin like a clerk. Yet some of them, like Ball, were literate in this sense, and many of them had some measure of pragmatic literacy; moreover, they all could gain access to texts through the medium of the spoken word. Together they formed a group of people whose sense of solidarity at the village level was extended to a much larger community bound together by a common attitude towards the uses of documents and a shared interpretation of certain texts. They were, then, a textual community.⁹⁴

In the course of the fifteenth century and early sixteenth century several trends discussed in this essay, like rising lay literacy, the growth of vernacular literatures, and the demand for school books, would continue and fuel the demand for written matter which culminated in the invention and rapid spread of the printing press. Yet one should not forget that even in the fifteenth century the spoken word continued to play a very important role in European society. Even in that most bookish of institutions, the university, the oral–aural medium of communication, in the form of lectures, disputations, sermons, and viva voce examinations, continued to flourish—as, to a considerable extent, it still does.⁹⁵ The liturgy and sermons of Christian

⁹⁰S. Justice, *Writing and rebellion. England in 1381* (Berkeley, 1994), 48.

⁹¹Justice, *Writing*, 13–38.

⁹²Justice, *Writing*, 38–139.

⁹³Justice, *Writing*, 192.

⁹⁴Justice, *Writing*, 191.

⁹⁵O. Weijers, *Le maniement du savoir. Pratiques intellectuelles à l'époque des premières universités (XIIIe–XIVe siècles)* (Turnhout, 1996), 131–55.

worship were also performed orally. Also a good case has been made by both Dennis Green and Joyce Coleman for the continuing vitality of orally declaimed literature, including the works of that most ‘modern’ of medieval authors, Geoffrey Chaucer.⁹⁶ Mary Carruthers and Janet Coleman have shown how reliance on a capacious and disciplined memory, which early work on literacy assigned to oral cultures, remained an important aspect of medieval society, especially in the monastic culture of the early and central Middle Ages, though still to some extent in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁹⁷ Even the religious and political ideologies of the later Middle Ages had a strong oral character, since, as Jesse Gellrich has argued, the written word continued to appropriate its authority from that of the spoken.⁹⁸

The scholarship of the last three decades on the history of medieval literacy, reading, and writing has made it abundantly clear that the European Middle Ages was a time of tremendous change and inventiveness, by no means less important than the eras that preceded and followed them. This new attitude had already become readily apparent in Henri-Jean Martin’s treatment of the Middle Ages in his survey of the history of writing from prehistory through the computer age, *L’histoire et pouvoirs d’écrit*, published in 1988.⁹⁹ The work of these medievalists has also opened up channels of dialogue between them and scholars of ancient and early modern literacy, revealing new continuities and differences. Thus a recent collection of essays on literacy in antiquity contains the essay of Peter Heather on ‘Literacy and power in the migration period’, while the historian of early modern reading, Anthony Grafton, is constantly attuned to medieval precedents.¹⁰⁰ More importantly for the future, the works discussed here, and the many more which have not been, have challenged older categories of scholarship, the neat division of the disciplines into history, literature, etc., and for historians, the specializations of social, cultural, intellectual, and political history. Literacy, reading, and writing, as envisioned by these scholars, are phenomena which refuse to be categorized in these ways, since they lie at the very heart of what it means to be human, this being the ability not only to think, but to communicate with others. This is by no means to say that the old categories should be abandoned, for they have both pedagogical and scholarly value. After all, it has been the blending of distinct approaches, methodologies, and theoretical models that have made this area of scholarship so fruitful. Rather, future work must remain mindful of the full range of other scholarship being done. An important start in this direction has been the formation of the ‘Pionier Project “Verschriftelijking”’, based

⁹⁶D.H. Green, *Medieval listening and reading. The primary reception of German literature, 800–1300* (Cambridge, 1994); Coleman, *Public reading*.

⁹⁷M. Carruthers, *The craft of thought. Meditation, rhetoric, and the making of images, 400–1200* (Cambridge, 1998); M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory. A study of memory in medieval culture* (Cambridge, 1990); J. Coleman, *Ancient and medieval memories. Studies in the reconstruction of the past* (Cambridge, 1992).

⁹⁸J.M. Gellrich, *Discourse and Dominion in the Fourteenth Century. Oral contexts of writing in philosophy, politics, and poetry* (Princeton, 1995).

⁹⁹H.J. Martin, *L’histoire et pouvoirs de l’écrit* (Paris, 1988), English trans. *The history and power of writing*, trans. L.G. Cochrane (Chicago, 1994).

¹⁰⁰P. Heather, ‘Literacy and power in the migration period’, in: *Literacy and power in the ancient world*, ed. A.K. Bowman and G. Woolf (Cambridge, 1994), 177–97; A. Grafton, *Commerce with the classics. Ancient books and renaissance readers* (Ann Arbor, 1997).

at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands and under the directorship of Marco Mostert. The project has set literacy, reading, and writing into the broader context of 'communication', a field which encompasses all aspects of human communication, whether written, oral, or non-verbal (e.g. gestures, images, smells), and has launched a series devoted to publishing work in all these areas.¹⁰¹ Writing and reading, textuality, written culture, and the book will, however, continue to lie at the very centre of this discourse, thanks to the durability and expressiveness of the written medium.

¹⁰¹M. Mostert, 'New approaches to medieval communication?', in *New approaches*, 15–37.