

Scott D. Troyan (editor):

Medieval Rhetoric: A Casebook

(Routledge Medieval Casebooks, vol. 36)

New York and London: Routledge, 2004

viii + 262 pages (bibliography; index)

ISBN: 0-415-97163-2

Price: £60

This volume is a welcome addition to the series of casebooks published by Routledge. The editor has assembled ten substantial essays that cover a range of issues including the theory and practice of rhetoric in the Middle Ages, investigation of specific texts, and future directions for research. The work that did most to bring rhetoric into the forefront of medieval studies in the modern era was Ernst Robert Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, which was published in German in 1948 and first available in English in Willard Trask's translation in 1953. The bibliography of the casebook gives the date of publication of Trask's translation as 1967, which is misleading. After Curtius it was the work of James J. Murphy, beginning in the 1970s, that opened up the subject on a broad front and did most to influence the direction of research on medieval rhetorical arts. Since Curtius and Murphy medieval rhetoric has been a flourishing if somewhat specialized field of study. What scepticism there has been about the value of the study of rhetoric has centred on the problem that rhetoric seems to be concerned more with form than meaning, and that an understanding of rhetorical forms and practices contributes little to interpretation.

Although the volume is carefully and purposefully organized, it would be useful for more sceptical readers to begin with the final essay, which is by the editor and which addresses this very problem, the place of rhetoric in hermeneutics ("Unwritten between the Lines: The Unspoken History of Rhetoric", pp. 217-245). Troyan begins with the silence of medieval theorists of rhetoric over how the rhetorical arts contribute to meaning, and combines this with something that is not always fully acknowledged, namely that manuals of rhetoric display a great deal of variation – rhetorical theory is not monolithic. His argument is that developments, changes, and what he calls 'shifts' in the ways in which manuals of rhetoric themselves are composed, and the different emphases that they exhibit, provide evidence for ideas about interpretation. He extends the field of investigation to include the evidence provided by the choices that authors make when they use rhetorical tropes. The following passage usefully encapsulates Troyan's argument:

Medieval literature offers numerous examples of the transmission of common themes, such as the stories of the fall of Troy, or King Arthur and his knights. While many have focused on the lines of transmission as evidence of the importance of such stories, many times these studies overlook the importance and significance of the adaptations to a particular context to our understanding of the text. Overdetermining the importance of the source in the retelling sometimes can cause us to overlook the significance of changes to the source invented during the retelling as relevant to interpretation. (p. 233)

What is being suggested here is that in a significant number of instances scholarship has become stalled in what was at one time referred to as 'source study'. It would be helpful to the argument here if Troyan had included examples of work that 'overdetermines the source'. Surely scholarship

on medieval literature has become more and more sensitive to context and adaptation, whether this involves a text or a rhetorical topos. The point that Troyan is concerned to make is that recognizing adaptation is an important step in interpretation; that is, it allows us to see the author at work. But there is nothing surprising in this conclusion. The classic example for Middle English literature, which has been commented on many times, must be the portrait of Alison in “The Miller’s Tale”. We recognize that Chaucer is here drawing on a convention, commonplace, or rhetorical topos – the description of the romance heroine – and that Chaucer has adapted the convention to the description of a young woman who is the wife of a tradesman. The recognition of Chaucer’s innovation, his adaptation of a rhetorical convention, takes us to the heart of interpretation or hermeneutics: the implications for meaning are very rich indeed. In an endnote attached to the statement quoted above, Troyan discusses the adaptation of the convention of the beheading game as found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. More examples like this, discussed fully in the body of the essay, would have a significant rhetorical effect; they would make the argument more convincing and persuade more readers to recognize the value of rhetoric for hermeneutics.

Another question that the study of rhetoric has provoked concerns originality. How do the best authors – that is, those whom modern readers most admire or find most congenial – accommodate the constraints of rhetoric? This issue inevitably leads into questions concerned with literacy and learning and medieval education, and the habits of composition that they instilled. The first paper in the collection is by Douglas Kelly and focuses on instruction and use of models (“The Medieval Art of Poetry and Prose: The Scope of Instruction and the Uses of Models”, pp. 1-24). The essay helps to put flesh on the bones of the famous description by John of Salisbury of Bernard of Chartres’s methods of teaching: the processes of learning through imitation. Kelly’s essay provides an extensive account of what this meant in practice for a medieval student of grammar and rhetoric. It makes much of the concept of ‘contextual environment’ first developed by Léopold Genicot, which gives meaning to anthology collections that would appear to have as their focus the art of writing itself. Their contents can be seen as stages in the processes of imitation and learning that lie behind ‘masterpieces’ – properly understood, this is a useful term. In the context of this argument Kelly’s essay addresses the question of the nature of originality in medieval writing and disposes of the notion that imitation and originality are mutually exclusive. An important corollary of this argument and one that Kelly is concerned to emphasize is that medieval education in the rhetorical arts had no sense of writing or creation *ex nihilo*. To varying degrees this has been recognized by most writers from medieval to modern, and it is an insight that could usefully be adopted by the seemingly ubiquitous modern university courses in creative writing.

The question of the creative or innovative use of rhetorical techniques is a central concern of a number of essays. Georgiana Donavin’s essay on Chaucer’s *An ABC* (“Alphabets and Rosary Beads in Chaucer’s *An ABC*”, pp. 25-39) shows how Chaucer’s poem is innovative in the way it uses the device of the alphabet – one of the tools of the arts of memory – for rhetorical invention. Chaucer designed his poem to serve the purpose of language learning, but by using the Virgin as its subject he gave to what was otherwise a conventional poem a special moral value.

Ann Astell shows another example of Chaucerian innovation (“On the Usefulness and Use Value of Books: A Medieval and Modern Inquiry”, pp. 41-62). Her subject is the Marxist concept of ‘use value’, in this case applied to books, and Astell is concerned with what have become known as ‘type C’ prologues – a classification introduced by R. W. Hunt – which address utility in terms of a book’s purpose. Astell shows how Chaucer complicates conventional ideas of utility and purpose in the *Canterbury Tales* and particularly in the “Retraction”.

Martin Carmargo's essay ("Time as Rhetorical Topos in Chaucer's Poetry", pp. 91-107) explores how Chaucer uses one of the conventional topics of medieval rhetoric – time – to discover new subject matter. The most well known passage from Chaucer's writings, the first eighteen lines of the "General Prologue" of the *Canterbury Tales*, has long been recognized as innovative, and it is, in the rhetorical sense, the result of Chaucer's invention based on his exploration of the subject of time. The essay includes discussions of how Chaucer develops – in ways that are sometimes conventional, sometimes innovative – the topos of time in texts ranging from the fabliaux to *Troilus and Criseyde*, especially book 2. But the fullest discussion is given to the "Merchant's Tale" where, Carmargo contends, Chaucer's main innovation is to use conventional arguments from time ironically.

Detecting innovation becomes in some essays an exercise in close reading. This is certainly the case with Timothy Spence's discussion ("The Prioress's *Oratio ad Mariam* and Medieval Prayer Composition", pp. 63-90) of the '*Oratio ad Mariam*' that serves as the prologue to the "Prioress's Tale" in the *Canterbury Tales*. Here the aim is to uncover and understand the strategies of this Middle English *oratio*. The techniques that Spence uses are like those for practical criticism but combined with a sensitivity to rhetorical strategies that are historic and need to be recovered, something that the essay does well. Its reading, informed by knowledge of medieval rhetoric, succeeds in rescuing the Prioress's prologue and tale from the poor reputation that it has among some Chaucerians.

Peter Mack's essay ("Argument and Emotion in *Troilus and Criseyde*", pp. 109-126) is also characterized by close reading informed by knowledge and appreciation of rhetorical strategies. Mack discovers seven techniques that Chaucer uses to set out the relationship between argument and emotion in *Troilus and Criseyde*. Much of the analysis arises from investigating Chaucer's use of Boccaccio's *Filostrato* and how Chaucer introduces innovations and complexities into crucial episodes. It is significant that not all of these seven techniques have precedents or counterparts in surviving manuals of rhetoric, and we see Chaucer developing his own rhetorical strategies where conventional techniques are lacking. Mack's contribution helps to confirm the point that Troyan raises in his summary essay that medieval rhetoric is dynamic not static, and it reflects Kelly's argument concerning imitation and innovation.

Troilus and Criseyde comes in for yet more scrutiny in Marc Guidry's essay ("Advice without Consent in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*", pp. 127-145), which is concerned with the topos of counsel and the way Chaucer shows – in this text as well as the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Parliament of Fowls* – how counsel functions as an instrument of male power. The essay ranges over a number of episodes in *Troilus and Criseyde* including one discussed by Peter Mack, namely the scene in book 2 in which Criseyde in private contemplates her choices in terms of what she would lose by entering into a relationship with Troilus and what she would gain emotionally and psychologically. For Guidry this shows Chaucer presenting Criseyde as unable to make a decision when she relies on her own counsel. Mack argues more positively that Chaucer shows that Criseyde's emotional reaction takes her beyond logic or reason. These are two different perspectives on the episode, and although the difference is there to be discovered by the reader (and the link is available through the index), some dialogue between the two papers would have been interesting. This instance also demonstrates that the investigation of rhetoric is not an exact science and that it is capable of opening up debate in unexpected ways.

Melissa Sprenkle's contribution ("The Traces of Invention: Phatic Rhetoric, Anthology, and Intertextuality in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", pp. 147-160) focuses on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and is concerned to discover whether the passages that suggest or recall oral

performance serve a rhetorical function or are mere ornamentation. The features that she highlights include tense shifting, onomatopoeia, formulaic references to oral performance, and a number of others. Sprenkle's argument is that these are essentially phatic rhetorical devices, that is, their function is mainly for emphasis, and are used self-consciously to allow the poet to incorporate into his text material from a variety of textual traditions; they serve as structuring devices to smooth the transitions from one type of material to another. The essay ultimately argues that the evidence provides a useful historical perspective. To use Sprenkle's phrase, the investigation is "an excavation of the seams of textual invention"; in other words, she has unearthed the author's method for organizing what is essentially a highly eclectic composition.

Robin Birky's contribution ("The Word Was Made Flesh': Gendered Bodies and Anti-Bodies in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Arts of Poetry", pp. 161-215) follows in detail the agenda that Troyan sets out in his summary essay, namely the investigation of 'shifts' in attitudes as they emerge, in this case, in rhetorical treatises themselves. Birky focuses on what is a controlling metaphor in the manuals – the body – and explores the different permutations that treatises or groups of treatises give to this metaphor and what they reveal about attitudes to composition and language. To take one example, John of Garland is suspicious of ornamentation and therefore favours "naked rhetoric", the metaphor of the naked body. He prefers "plain style" and might be seen as an early advocate of the type of rhetoric favoured by the Plain English Society. This essay is a useful exercise in deconstruction as applied to rhetorical treatises, and it opens up another level of interest for these texts.

It is clear from the foregoing discussion how much the poetry of Chaucer dominates the collection. This is to be expected since the volume grew out of a session at a conference of the New Chaucer Society. Altogether this is an interesting and stimulating volume, but the idea for the book would have been better served by casting the net wider to include work on material from the broad range of medieval or even just Middle English literature. How do less accomplished medieval poets and prose writers use their education in the rhetorical arts? Are they slavishly conventional or do they, like Chaucer, use rhetorical devices creatively? What follows is a stanza from an anonymous fifteenth-century English poem known as *The Devils' Parliament*:

3e! prophetys spekyn al myst
 What they mene we neuer knew;
 They spekyn of on scholde hote Crist,
 But Maryes sone hatte Ihesu.
 Cryst of godhede schulde be a twyst,
 But Maryes sone neuer in God grew.
 They bygyle us with the lyst;
 The cloth hys of another hewe.¹

The stanza shows a self-conscious use of language and syntax that betrays an awareness of how language generates effects and can be manipulated to persuade an audience. No one would claim that this text rivalled Chaucer in terms of subtlety and innovation, but we do the subject a disservice if we privilege the work of what modern culture considers the 'best' of medieval literature. A second case book might explore ways in which imitation, rhetoric, and innovation permeated what formed the bulk of the writing to which medieval audiences were exposed.

¹ *The Devils' Parliament and The Harrowing of Hell and Destruction of Jerusalem*, ed. William Marx, Middle English Texts, vol. 25 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1993), p. 52, lines 57-64.

This volume will be useful for undergraduate and postgraduate students for whom rhetoric is a new subject; at the same time, it will provide for established scholars a valuable insight into the current state of research in medieval rhetoric.

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