

BOOK REVIEWS

ANITA OBERMEIER. *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism in the European Middle Ages*. Amsterdam & Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999. Pp. 314. US\$ 80.00.

This wide-ranging book will be welcomed by comparatists with an interest in the Middle Ages, by medievalists with a comparative bent, and by all those interested in the kinds of interactions that take place among authors, texts, and readers. Professor Obermeier examines more than seventy authors writing over a period from classical times through the Middle Ages in order to illuminate the literary topos of auctorial self-criticism, which has been strangely neglected until now. What she finds, in its broadest expression, is that an author's self-criticism may seem superficially to be an expression of remorse, but, when scrutinized, can be seen to be "a strategy that perpetuates writing" (166). That is, by deprecating earlier works, whether on the ground that they are immoral, insulting, literarily inferior or whatever, an author can create a personalized invitation to himself/herself to keep on writing in the hope of some form of "improvement." It is an insight that is at once profound and delightful.

Professor Obermeier's first chapter is subtitled "Authorship and Authority," which helps explain why she prefers the Latinate (or, for that matter, Middle English) form "auctorial" to the expected modern English "authorial." Because in many cases the author wishes to claim authority or to deflect it to another author or even ascribe it correctly to God, the form "auctorial" permits her to keep the word's potential constantly in the reader's mind. More specifically she notes that she perceives "great manipulative powers in the authors I discuss. Therefore, another modern critical concept that could help illuminate auctorial self-criticism is 'interauctoriality,' which means that a literary work depicts its author's contact with the 'author personality' of a previously-read literary text, presenting two authors simultaneously" (20). Her notes indicate that the phrase comes from Ina Schaberr's article, "Interauktorialität." This first chapter has a very good treatment of Salman Rushdie's forced apology for his writings, which sets the stage for a look much farther backwards in time.

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While it is impossible even to list all of the authors studied in this volume, nevertheless a sketch of its contents may be useful to the potential reader. Because all quotations from primary sources are given in both the original language and in translation, the book is easy to use. Professor Obermeier begins her historical survey in Chapter Two with the classical tradition and Stesichorus. Not a writer whose name is on everyone's lips, but essential both because of his antiquity and because of his accepted influence on Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*. The longest entry in this section is on Ovid, who "implicates the reader along with the author" (38) in literary understanding, noting that how his works are interpreted will depend to a degree upon whether or not the reader has an upright mind ("recta si mente legatur"). Chapter Three, on the early Christian tradition, has an important entry on St. Augustine, whose *Retractions* are re-workings of earlier writings from both a literary and religious viewpoint. Chapter Four, on the medieval Latin tradition, treats eight authors. One of them, Peter of Blois, wrote in Latin at the English Court of Henry II and his French wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine — a comparatist's dream. He was fond of disparaging the lasciviousness of his youthful works, which, as Professor Obermeier wryly points out, permitted him "to keep working on them without reprimand" (88).

Chapter Five, on the German tradition, treats Hartmann von Aue and five others. Chapter Six, on the French tradition, takes up eight authors, giving the most space to Jean de Meun. Professor Obermeier observes that Jean de Meun styles himself not only as the author of a text, but also as a compiler of the texts of other authors. By so doing, he creates "an almost post-modern effort to dislocate the narrative centre of the text" (119). In Chapter Seven, on the Italian tradition, there are essays on Dante and Boccaccio, as well as a substantial entry (the second-longest in the book) on Petrarch. Those who do not find Petrarch to be "the most ambivalent of the medieval Italian writers" (141) may have difficulty in accepting Professor Obermeier's assertion that he wavers "excessively between self-criticism and self-justification" (141). However, she is in good company — she cites Charles Singleton, who considered Petrarch to have recanted in the last poem of the *Canzoniere* and in the first, while leaving in between "a vast array of love poetry" (143).

Chapter Eight, on the English tradition, includes the book's longest entry, on Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer's well-known "Retraction" at the end of *The Canterbury Tales*, Professor Obermeier argues, "is neither an isolated incident in European medieval literature nor in the whole of Chaucer's canon, but an integrated one" (185). This well-earned placement of the "Retraction"

in both an authorial and historical context leads to a later, more sophisticated insight into the kinds of games a self-conscious author like Chaucer plays: "Hence, there is a triple apology structure in *The Canterbury Tales*: The Nun's Priest excuses himself and blames the rooster; Chaucer excuses himself in the General Prologue, Miller's Tale, and Tale of Melibee and blames the tale tellers; Chaucer excuses and accuses himself in the Retraction" (210n).

Chapter Nine, on the Spanish tradition, includes eight authors, of whom Ramon Llull and Juan Ruiz, the Arcipreste de Hita may be the best known to non-specialists. The final chapter, number ten, contains essays on seven female writers who employ authorial self-criticism, including Hrotswitha von Ganderheim and Hildegard von Bingen. This chapter is more polemical than the others and will consequently provoke more dispute. Professor Obermeier's sweeping claim that "the prevailing medieval theological view was that Adam possessed a rational mind and Eve did not" (252) is symptomatic of her difficulties here. Adam was often associated with *sapientia* and Eve with *scientia*, but that is scarcely to deny her rationality. Here and elsewhere Professor Obermeier's references to the antifeminist tradition seem a little over-simplified and almost shrill. Chapter Ten also includes a section called "General Ruminations," where she justly notes that "the sheer number of self-critical examples demonstrates that this literary tactic strikes at the heart of medieval language and literature" (264).

The great strength of this book is its impressive sweep. Just to have located authorial self-critical passages in this many classical and medieval authors is quite an achievement; to have analyzed each author's particular usage of the trope is evidence of great critical stamina as well as scholarly industry. The analyses, however, are necessarily perfunctory. Given that the bibliography contains almost 550 *secondary* works, it is apparent that Professor Obermeier has done an enormous amount of background reading. But when these studies are divided by the number of authors treated we see that she can only consider a few main critical strands in the abundant literature surrounding all of the major authors. By trying to say something about everything an author always runs the risk of saying too little to please every reader, not to mention the risk of saying something insufficiently grounded or insufficiently informed.

Anita Obermeier has done us all a great favour both by pulling this widely scattered material together and by analysing it. Those who come after will benefit enormously from her ground-breaking endeavours. (CHAUNCEY WOOD, MCMASTER UNIVERSITY)