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On Not Wasting Time

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Abstract

This essay considers the value of thinking about the strangeness of the medieval past. It explores how varied human subjectivity can be across time and thinks about how accessing radically alien subjectivities from the medieval past can have a value for us in our present. It takes three examples of attitudes to particular concepts—genius, technology, and love—that demonstrate both the difference of the medieval past and how our social norms and values have their roots in that historical period. Reading medieval literature requires us, at times, to make imaginative leaps—where do they take us?

The first recorded use of the idea of 'wasting time' comes in the 1380s, in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*. He writes about girls who "gonne hir tymes waste" (283)—wasted their time—in the service of love.[1] This kind of language reveals a broader attitude to what temporality represents. In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that each culture understands its world through metaphor; indeed, that "human thought processes are largely metaphorical" (2008, 6). They claim that the idea that time can be wasted, budgeted, saved, spent, squandered, or invested bespeaks a particular way of viewing the world that comes from the working culture of our society, a culture in which time is commodified. We see this in the idea of the hourly wage or of charging interest over fixed periods of time, for instance. This way of thinking about time is not inevitable, or common to all cultures. The fact that we see this metaphorical language emerging at a certain point in the Middle Ages might remind us that it was in the fourteenth century that public clocks appeared in town squares, for example. 'Merchant's time' jostled against 'church time' (liturgical, cyclical time) across the medieval period.[2] This linguistic example (wasting time), accessible through a study of literature and history, demonstrates not only what in our culture is rooted in the Middle Ages, but also what is different. Not every culture thinks that time is money. As with so much of our culture, the crucible of change is the medieval period, a moment at which we see the familiar and the different, the obviously relevant and the seemingly incomprehensible, merchant's time and church time, side by side.

The relevance of many aspects of medieval literature is often seductive, surprising, and wonderful for those first encountering the texts. Students are often astonished when they realise that six hundred and fifty years ago the Wife of Bath was pointing out that women had not had the chance to tell their own stories, that Hoccleve wrote a poem about his own mental breakdown and recovery, that Mandeville talks about cultural relativity, or that Margery Kempe starkly describes marital rape. Medieval texts often appeal to students through modern translations or adaptations: Heaney's *Beowulf*, a translation that makes manifest the relevance of the Northern Irish conflict to the world of the poem, or postcolonial versions of *The Canterbury Tales* such as *The Cachoeira Tales*, *Telling Tales*, or the *The Wife of Willesden* are intelligent and accessible readings of medieval texts.[3]

However, in this essay, I want to think not about the relevant and familiar, but about the different and the seemingly incomprehensible. What is the value of confronting medieval attitudes, texts, and ideas that are utterly different from the perspectives that readers might hold today? In *The Value of the Humanities*, Helen Small writes that the humanities "possess a distinctive relation to the idea of knowledge as being inextricable from human subjectivity" (2013, 174).[4] Here, I explore how varied human subjectivity can be across time and think about how accessing radically alien subjectivities from the medieval past can have a value for us in our present.[5] I take three examples of attitudes to particular concepts—genius, technology, and love—that demonstrate both the difference of the medieval past

[1] Chaucer quotations are taken from Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Benson, Robinson, and Cannon, 3rd ed., 2008.

[2] See Le Goff 1960, 417–33; Le Goff 1980, 29–42.

[3] See Turner 2023.

[4] See also Drees 2021.

[5] Many historians and critics have written about the different ways that medieval thinkers understood subjectivity; see especially Newman 2021 and Sobecki 2019.

and how our social norms and values have their roots in that historical period. Reading medieval literature requires us, at times, to make imaginative leaps—where do they take us? And is it a waste of time?

Genius

One of Chaucer's poems, *The House of Fame*, is a poem about writer's block. Chaucer's avatar figure, Geffrey, cannot think of anything to write a poem about. He considers great poems from the past, he emerges into a desert of torpor, he is seized by an authority figure from Dante's *Divine Comedy* and is taken to view his poetic predecessors; he converses with a stranger to whom he disconsolately confides that he has seen nothing new so far. But then he reaches the House of Rumour, a place of insane, busy chaos, ever-moving, full of whispers and contemporary gossip. Here he encounters versions of ordinary people—including pilgrims—carrying stories with them. It is a place where multiple voices speak, clash, lie, compete, and join together. The scene connects to a moment earlier in the poem when the eagle-guide figure berates Geffrey, telling him that the reason that he has writer's block is that he spends all his time on his own, reading books in his private study, instead of listening to his neighbours, who live right on his doorstep. His senses have become numbed, the eagle declares, suggesting that he is not listening, that he is "dumb as any stone" (656) and that his sight is blurry because of his isolation.

For a modern reader, there is something very odd about this. Surely what writers need is to be alone? Since the Enlightenment, the idea of the genius has evolved as an image of someone solitary, original, and separated from others. As Alfonso Montuori and Ronald Purser write in their essay, "Deconstructing the Lone Genius Myth," "the popular image of the lone genius or solitary artist is romanticized" in our culture, and remains prevalent (1995, 74). A good example of the attitude to creativity that has dominated for hundreds of years can be found in Steinbeck's words:

> Our species is the only creative species, and it has only one creative instrument, the individual mind and spirit of a man. Nothing was ever created by two men. There are no good collaborations, whether in music, in art, in poetry, in mathematics, in philosophy. Once the miracle of creation has taken place, the group can build and extend it, but the group never invents anything. The preciousness lies in the lonely mind of a man. (2002, 131)

Steinbeck here makes a passionate statement about creativity, asserting that it cannot, fundamentally, be collaborative: it resides in the lone individual man. Virginia Woolf suggested that there might also be brilliance to be found in the lonely mind of a woman, but she too emphasised the importance of solitude and privacy: to write, a woman needed, above all else, a room of her own.

In the medieval world, people thought differently. *The House of Fame*, as discussed above, emphasises the sterility of isolation and suggests that inspiration comes from talking to other people and, indeed, from adapting, re-telling, translating, and voicing stories that come from many different sources. Writing poetry is presented as a collaboration between past and present authors, between story-tellers and transcribers, between speakers and listeners. The poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* tells us that he is repeating a story that he heard 'in town,' suggesting that he has indeed been listening to others. *The Canterbury Tales* is presented as a series of stories being repeated by Chaucer's

avatar, who has heard them told by a varied collection of pilgrims. In concrete terms, Margery Kempe was only able to write her book by collaborating with scribes to whom she dictated her life story. Once texts were written down, scribes often corrected them, completed unfinished stories, and added comments. This interaction or co-creation of the text was entirely normal.

This understanding of collaborative creation was part of a culture in which it was hard to be alone. Most of life took place in public and semi-public spaces and very few people would have a room of their own. Parents, children, apprentices, and servants might all be sleeping in one room, even in quite wealthy households. In the fourteenth century, many people started to be more concerned about privacy, and more parlours and upstairs rooms (solars) were built as alternative spaces to the hall.[6] But even when more private spaces existed, they tended to be accessible to various people—and they were also accessible through other rooms. This was the era before the corridor, so even the king had to go through many other rooms to get to his own bedroom—and so did anyone else that he wanted to take there. In the "Merchant's Tale," May is only able to be alone to read a secret love letter in the privy; in *Troilus and Criseyde*, when the lovers seem to be in a private room, Criseyde's uncle can access it, and her female companions are all just outside the door as there is no corridor.[7] So medieval writers were accustomed to a world in which people intruded all the time; doors were open, spaces were porous, and people did not have an expectation that they could have time on their own. But this was also a moment in which some people aspired to have some time alone, and the arrangement of space increasingly allowed people to live and to think in new ways.

Studying a world in which people had different understandings of private and public space, in which creativity was not seen as something isolating or solitary, and in which collaboration was a fundamental part of textual production might make us question some of our own assumptions. What might we gain from thinking more about the benefits of shared creative work? Might we end up with more jointly-authored novels, more collaborative research in the humanities, more educational assignments for children that involve producing work or art as a group? Our ideas of creativity are profoundly limited—thinking ourselves into the Middle Ages could be radically innovative—and creative.

Technology

One of the greatest technological inventions in history was the printing press, which arrived in England at the end of the medieval period. The benefits of print are obvious: texts could be mass-produced and became cheap and easily accessible. Information could be circulated quickly, and both news and entertainment could spread far and wide. Most people are used to thinking of print as an unambiguous good that has been formative for our societies. Indeed, more generally, we are used to thinking of most technological advances as positive: cars rather than carts, email rather than snail mail, planes rather than boats, washing machines rather than tubs, pencil sharpeners rather than knives. But many people are increasingly aware of the problems inherent in many technological innovations: for example, many of the technologies which make our lives easier and more convenient are reliant on

[6] See Schofield 2003, 66.
[7] See Turner 2019, esp. chapter 2.

fossil fuels and are therefore environmentally destructive and polluting. The carbon footprint of more technologically advanced countries is far heavier than that of less developed countries.

Similarly, there were problematic aspects relating to the transformative technology of print. For obvious reasons, we know far more about what was printed than about what was not. But we do know quite a bit about what lay behind the choices that early printers made. Printers were interested in commercial success. When the printing press was set up in Westminster, very close to the city of London, Caxton and his successors focused heavily on printing texts that had been written in a particular dialect—the east Midland dialect that had become London English. This dialect was already becoming dominant in bureaucratic documents; now its supremacy over other dialects was assured as texts in this dialect were able to spread widely and were given authority by print. As Simon Horobin notes, Caxton "was first and foremost a businessman keen to exploit the financial possibilities opened up by printing."[8] He was not trying to represent a wide range of texts, dialects, or scribal practices, and so he focused, broadly, on the kind of language favoured by Chancery (the government administrative offices in London) and on standardising spelling. His choices contributed to a cultural environment very different to the world of a century earlier, in which "all regional dialects were considered to have equal status."[9] Extraordinary poems such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were not printed until 1839, as the north-western dialect was not of interest to early printers or to the public that they wished to serve.[10] There was a narrowing of taste, as printers were able to control what texts circulated widely, and their interests were primarily commercial.

Printers were also able to control how texts were changed and edited, to fit their own feelings about what was in good taste and what their audiences might want—or should be allowed—to read. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, an exceptionally interesting text, sometimes called the first autobiography in English, was written in the 1430s. It details Margery's travels as far afield as the Holy Land, her intimate conversations with God, her struggles to persuade her husband to live chastely with her, the accusations of heresy that were made against her, her business ventures, her mental health problems after childbirth, and her encounters with many important men and women of the day. This book was printed relatively early, in 1501, by Wynkyn de Worde. This printed text, however, bears very little resemblance to the manuscript. It has been dramatically cut so that nothing remains about Margery's body, her travels, or the intimate conversations that she has with Christ. Instead, the book has become a series of conventional contemplative musings, with anything unusual or seemingly rebellious or challenging removed. In 1521, when Henry Pepwell reprinted the text, he added a preface, emphasising that Margery Kempe had been an anchoress—a walled-up nun.[11] In fact, she had been a married woman who had fourteen children. Much that is unusual and important about the text stems from her dual identity as a woman in the world (married, active, able to work and travel) *and* as a woman devoted to Christ. This identity has been mutilated by the printers, who wanted to make sure her text conformed to what people wanted to read (or what they thought people wanted to read). Before print, the text was read by a very small audience, but it was read in its entirety, and commented

[8] See Horobin 2011, 59–78, 75.
[9] See Horobin 2011, 69.
[10] For discussion, see Brewer and Gibson 1999, 2, 28.
[11] See Lochrie 1994, 220–25.

upon. Print completely changed how audiences perceived Margery Kempe, and indeed it grossly misrepresented her.

The extraordinary and world-changing efficiency of print had the downsides that efficiency often has. Things that were perceived as risky, niche, not-mainstream were side-lined or changed in the service of commerce and a particular idea of taste. Many fascinating medieval texts were not printed—just as today wonderful books are not published because the author or their work is seen as chancy or non-commercial. Thinking about how this happens can help us to think more generally about the pitfalls of technological advances. It might also encourage us to reconsider the very narrative of progress that implies that the past is lesser than the present, that things have always improved or become more sophisticated. The print revolution involved losses as well as gains, and perhaps that is almost always the case with technological change. Manuscript culture had advantages which vanished with the advent of print. Reflecting on what we have lost from the medieval world does not mean abandoning the obvious advantages of technology, but can help us to look at them from a new angle.

Love

My final example of the value of spending time considering the radical otherness of the medieval period relates to love. We live in a world obsessed with the idea of romantic, sexual (usually heterosexual) love. Adverts and films, books and lives are often structured around an assumption that most people aspire to live in a relationship of sexual love. The fiction of our world supports, reflects, and drives that assumption. For many hundreds of years, a large proportion of fiction—particularly novels and lyric poetry—has been centred around sexual love. When students first encounter early medieval, Old English literature they are often surprised and intrigued to discover that literature is not *inevitably* fascinated by sexual love—that both the social and the literary primacy of sexual love is cultural rather than innate or unavoidable. Just as ideas of privacy, and the technology of print, developed in the long medieval period, so the idea of sexual love as a major topic for literature emerged in the Middle Ages, specifically in the so-called twelfth-century renaissance when the genres of lyric and romance became dominant.[12]

In early medieval poetry, sexual love is relatively unimportant. The poetic corpus includes epic poems such as *Beowulf*, elegies or laments including *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, religious poetry including *The Dream of the Rood* and saints' lives, and battle poetry such as *Maldon* and *Brunanburgh*. Heroism, the decline of civilisations, the soul's relationship with God, and homosocial relationships are all far more important than relationships of sexual love and desire between women and men. While action is crucial in many of these poems, many of them are also interested in emotional relationships.[13] Those emotional, loving relationships are, however, more commonly relationships between friends or battle companions, between a man and his lord, or between blood relatives: a woman and her children or her brother, a father and his sons. In *The Wanderer*, for example, there is a scene of great emotional power in which an isolated man dreams of his lord, imagining himself back in the gift-giving ceremony in the hall, embracing and kissing his patron, laying his hands and head on the lord's knee. *Beowulf* is punctuated by descriptions of loving, tragic relationships between blood relatives, not spouses or

[12] See Swanson 1999; Novikoff 2017; Ashe, 2017.
[13] See Jorgensen, McCormack, and Wilcox 2015.

lovers: Hildeburgh, who suffers the deaths of her son and brother on opposite sides of a battle; Grendel's mother, taking revenge for the death of her son; Hrethel, who no longer wants to live when one of his sons kills another. Husbands and wives are (sometimes) depicted in harmonious relationships but are not given the kind of emotional connection that we see between relatives, or indeed in relationships between liege lords and their men or between companions: Hrothgar's passionate grief at the death of his friend Aeschere; Wiglaf's unshakeable loyalty to Beowulf in his final battle. Some short poems in the Old English corpus hint at passionate relationships of sexual love (*Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wife's Lament*), but there is no question that other kinds of relationships are far more important in Old English literature as a whole.

Across the high Middle Ages, as new genres emerged, as more women became involved in commissioning, producing, and reading literature, as affect became more important in religious discourse and theology, literary texts increasingly focused on relationships between men and women. Heterosexual love and desire took over as major topics in literature (often in misogynist ways). By the later part of the medieval period, while relationships between men and their lords, between companions, and between parents and children remained important in secular literature, relationships involving sexual love had become much more popular foci.[14]

For those encountering early medieval literature for the first time, the fact that sexual love was relatively unimportant is often revelatory. Thinking about this makes students question how the fundamental aspects of their own society, relationships, and fiction may in fact be contingent; that there may be other ways of structuring emotional lives and the depictions of emotional lives. One specific outcome of this might be for us to consider why relationships such as friendships are relatively unimportant in popular literature today in comparison to sexual relationships, for instance. More broadly, we might question what fiction does, and whether its function is to reflect or to direct our own understanding of emotional lives and relationships. Romance novels and romantic comedies, adverts and Instagram posts encourage people to imagine certain kinds of relationships as aspirational and ideal—but some of our desires might be culturally constructed by fiction and media, not innate or inevitable. Subjectivity is an ever-changing thing.

Conclusion: The Times, Are They a Changing?

The fact that they did things differently in the past is one of the reasons for studying and thinking about other times. The long medieval period is particularly significant for us precisely because it was a crucible for so many major changes that have shaped today's world: to give just two major examples, this was the era when European capitalism, banking, and the merchant economy developed, and this was also the period in which parliaments emerged and became dominant, moving European societies away from more clearly authoritarian rule—and ultimately towards democracy. The dramatic changes that we can trace help us to think about before and after, and to engage in thought experiments about other ways that societies and literature could have developed. In other words, we can step out of our societies and think about contingency and inevitability—might our identities, our polities, our social structures, our economic models, our ways of representing and imagining ourselves have developed

[14] Religious literature remained very important, and indeed increasingly used the language of sexual love, but that is a subject for another day.

in different directions? Could that have been better? For anyone interested in what humans are and how society functions, the study of the medieval past is anything but a waste of time.

The three examples that I have discussed in this essay are examples of things that were radically different in the Middle Ages and that began to change during that time. This era saw the development of many of the social, political, and cultural norms that have shaped modernity. Thinking in depth about the medieval world allows us both to see how ideas such as the importance of privacy developed and to consider the downsides of those changes. For readers to consider what it was like to live in a world that thought differently about creativity, that had different technologies, that valued other kinds of relationships, involves making imaginative leaps, thinking about living our lives according to different sets of values. Reading medieval texts makes us consider human subjectivity, both personally and culturally, to examine what it means to be human and to live in the world. If everyone in public life thought more about contingency, subjectivity, creativity, and the possible benefits of questioning our assumptions, our world could change in fascinating and radical ways.

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