UCLA
Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title
The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinctions (review)

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/55h0t6k4

Journal
Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 13(1)

ISSN
0069-6412

Author
Weston, Lisa M. C.

Publication Date
1982-10-01

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

BOOK REVIEWS

Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinctions.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982

In *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages* Judson Allen extends his previous exploration of the late medieval definition of "literature" to a book-length study of a method of reading which will best explain medieval texts. Allen deals immediately and sensibly with the problem of expectations: as modern readers we come to medieval literature burdened with modern sensibilities and preconceptions derived from prior scholarship. We may expect a specific and particular category for "poetry" or "literature," we may expect some intra-textural sense of literary form–a sense of the text as having its own integrity, internal intentions and constraints–and we may expect that the poem will enact some particular type of contact with the audience. Allen discovered, as more and more critics of medieval literature are discovering, that these expectations are not fulfilled.

Working with one basic assumption, that the "literary criticism" of an age can serve as evidence for literary attitudes and presumptions, Allen seeks in commentaries their writers' problems and needs. He discovers that (I paraphrase) we must give up "literature" to get back poetry de-trivialized: in fact–rendering his title somewhat tautological –poetry is part not of a "literature" but of ethics. In order to reconstruct the sense of reading "in a glossed manuscript, with the mind of one trained by the methods of medieval accessus," he concentrates on glosses on literature, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for example, as well as Boethius, Statius, Martianus Capella, Geoffrey of Vinsauf and Hymn Books (and using the Bible and biblical commentaries as a control), to establish a medieval reading.

Over the course of the book, Allen develops these points with logic and force, and with due consideration for the meaning an implications of critical statements. The first chapter, "Ethical Poetry, Poetic Ethics and the Sentence of Poetry," finds a role for the poem in the medieval universe. Medieval critics and commentators habitually assigned texts to their proper

part of philosophy, and conventionally poetry belonged with ethics, the study of human behavior. Poetic thinking, as a type of ethical thinking, dealt with behavior figuratively, through models (characters in medieval poems are thus exemplary types rather than individuals). Its intent was not to provide material for contemplation or knowledge, but rather the means to be made good; not demonstration but persuasion. The poem's effect is thus part of its content. Such a poetic ethics places blame or praise within a hierarchical set of assumptions which answers a hierarchy of styles: tragedy invites praise and comedy blame. It works within a shame culture; it is an essentially rhetorical ethics, a morality always conscious of an audience. And because the exemplars are judged according to the standards of the readers' world, there is a continuity between readers and characters: they inhabit the same world.

The next two chapters deal with the form of the text which is to fulfill this ethical role. Allen first distinguishes the *forma tractandi*, the form of treating, from its traditional complement, the *forma tractatus*, the literal arrangement of the parts of a text. The two forms operate simultaneously on two distinct intellectual levels. Chapter Two considers "Poetic Thinking and the Forma Tractandi." Commentaries distinguish *modi*, procedures or structures for thought (typically five: the poetic, the fictional, the descriptive, the digressive, the metaphoric) with which a matter may be defined, divided, proved, refuted and/or exemplified. All the *modi* have to do with language; one group concerns things words can make referents do, a second language itself, defined in terms of relation to referent, and a third naming or guaranteeing the presence of a value judgment. But further, as Allen analyzes them, as mental postures these *modi* constitute "genres" defined not in terms of verbal abstracts but as verbal events with a rhetorical effect. *Modi* involve actions; *tractandi* is a process word, a gerundive with a sense of obligation. And a poem is thus not a thing but an example, as it is also a result, of behavior.

Chapter Three in turn takes up "Poetic Disposition and the *Forma Tractatus*." In medieval texts form dominates meaning: the *forma tractatus* distinguishes parts within texts and the discursive or rhetorical organization which arrays and relates those parts. Usually this organization is nonnarrative, even though the text may tell a narrative story and have a clear plot. The organization does not answer the modern, organic, causal question, why does this part come next? It responds instead to an inorganic, acausal question–how do this part and the next one go together, and why? The answer discovers logical, analogoical, even allegorical relationships among the parts. With such a rhetorical, Ciceronian disposition goes a love

of division and of making meaningful distinctions, of creating a structure of division which can be allegorized and parallels which can be drawn to what is outside the text. In Allen's example, the eight books of Malory analogize the eight stages of the world, a parallel which correlates with the apocalyptic overtones of the last book. In renaissance poems these parallels would be expressed internally and would be essentially separable entities. Not so with less self-contained medieval poems: they operate as if incomplete or—more accurately—as if individually but part of the "whole poem" of the world.

The last three chapters take up this participation in the larger world implied by poetry's ethical function as well as by analogical thinking and form. Chapter Four, "*Assimilatio* and the Material of Poetry," concerns *assimilatio*'s association with *ymaginatio* and *representatio*. *Assimilatio*, evoking a species of existence and in the Averroistic version of Aristotle taking the place of mimesis, deals, as does all aspects of this ethical poetry, with dynamic structures rather than statis things. This three-fold task of *assimilatio* includes descriptive comparison, relation of description to thing described and evocation of a universal. Metaphor is the assimilation of a parallel system; having a literal or metaphysical base, metaphor is in the world and the poet is merely its reporter.

Chapter Five, "The Assimilation of the Real World," makes this relationship still clearer. Metaphor does not merely draw parts of the real world into the poem; it demands that the reader's attention be directed not only to the text, but also to exterior meaning. A text functions in part as a fixed artificial memory, images and stories placed and ordered to remind the reader of the moral and theological examples of sacred and secular history. This ethical, commemorative function further blurs the distinctions of fact and fiction, reality and text. Chapter Six, "*Consideratio* and the Audiences of Poetry," begins with this continuity of life and text, and with the place of the medieval audience within the text as it assimilates rather than mimics life. Making of resemblances, heightened language and expressive power accomplish *assimilatio*; *consideratio* convinces that it is true. *Consideratio* is that feature of poetry which allows *assimilatio* to be credible, so that the text's moral pattern can be fulfilled. This credibility at base is an act or posture which implicates the audience in the poem—something similar to Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief, which constitutes poetic faith," but without the disjunction of poetry from ordinary life.

The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages is not a revolutionary book, although Allen does urge his readers to revise their critical assumptions and approaches. Some readers may perhaps view the classification of poetry

under ethics as reductive, but the operant medieval definition of ethics (as the study of human behavior, including human verbal behavior) is wider than our normal use of the term. Allen makes a cogent case both for the existence of this understanding of literature among the medieval creators of texts, and (in exemplary forays from intellectual history into criticism of individual texts) for its use to modern readers seeking to understand Dante or Chaucer. Allen's conclusions sit well with the renewed critical interest in grammar and rhetoric as the bases for medieval literature and its analysis.

More controversial perhaps is the book's implication that recovery of this medieval literary philosophical stance would benefit the modern world. Allen clearly believes that, now, as then, poetry ought to be part of ethics, that literature ought to teach us about human behavior and raise questions of value. He is clearly and explicitly opposed to "solipsistic critics, such as [the structuralist Paul] Zumthor" (p. 303) who deal with the text in isolation. The penultimate paragraph makes this opinion clear:

> the social scientists are, in modern academe, asking most of the interesting and important questions, but . . . the people really most likely to get good answers to those most important questions are the people who best understand story-telling. Time was and may still be in some quarters that the people who understand story-telling best were the theologians. But of late most theologians have been more interested in the fact that their stories were probably not true than they were in fact in the fact that they were stories. The literary critics, whose stories never had been true, were not distracted by this problem. But they did make the mistake of believing that stories were made by words, and began to look at the structures of texts rather than at the forms of act. The social scientists have stories that are real facts, but the stories lack language, and cannot be remembered. The medieval critic, by contrast, had stories, and language, and a truth that was not the mere slave of fact, but in terms of which facts could find their meanings. The besetting modern temptation, in a world full of meaninless facts and impotent meanings, where public language tends to be either jargon or propaganda, and comforting language seems always merely personal and private, has been to seek seek refuge, either in the solipsism, or in mere power over facts. But neither refuge is a safe one, or a human one either.
> (p. 312)

Allen has previously advocated (in his 1974 article, "The Education of the Public Man: A Medieval View," *Renascence* 26, 171-188) an updated

medieval, rhetorical education in the handling of images for the public servants and information managers of our world. Here, too, the medieval poet is an alternative model as well as an object of study.

Lisa M. C. Weston
University of California
Los Angeles