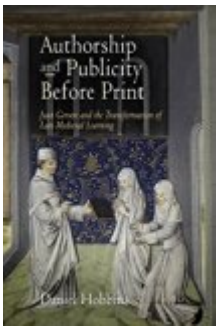
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Daniel Hobbins. *Authorship and Publicity Before Print: Jean Gerson and the Transformation of Late Medieval Learning.* The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. xii + 335 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4155-6.

Reviewed by Marshall Crossnoe

Published on H-German (December, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Jean Gerson was arguably the most important European writer living during the fifty years before Europe's creation of moveable type printing, and yet his story has been difficult to tell. Gerson was a famous preacher, a leading university master, chancellor of Notre Dame, and a dominant voice at the Council of Constance. But Daniel Hobbins convinces us he was more than that. He was a mirror of his times, a creative and prolific writer who actively managed the publication of his works for a public audience that he understood, sought to serve, and in a sense cultivated. Such a personality pursuing such literary labors could only have inhabited a discrete cultural space, a transitional period in many ways beyond high medieval scholasticism but not quite the world of early modern humanism. Hobbins has attentively followed Gerson as guide to the fifteenth-century European world of letters. In doing so, he has placed Gerson studies, and fifteenth-century studies in general, within larger conversations about authorship, literacy, and public life, where both inform and advance the discussions. The book is thoroughly researched and convincingly argued, but more significantly, it pushes the limits of our accepted understanding of its subject, thus making it a fitting addition to the Middle Ages Series published by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

A master in a world of books where manuscript production had risen sharply but where few new books had appeared, Gerson developed a "sophisticated program of reading" for theology students (p. 20). His program identified and promoted a canon of works that revealed the "common school of theological truth" (p. 40). This "common school" determined the proper way for a learned, well-read person to think and talk (and write) about theological subjects. Gerson was an expert among the small literate elite that frowned on originality, and articulating the vocation and legitimacy of the contemporary writer troubled him. He even expressed guilt over his own original productions. But unlike earlier guides to good reading, Gerson's program reveals concern with literary authenticity, the recommendation to read

silently, the advice to use books as reference tools. It reveals an approach to books and reading that differed from that of the schoolmen. Gerson approached texts as collections of writings as books and not as collections of arguments, and that approach situates him in a new historical space.

Chapters 2 and 3 turn from books to authorship. Gerson's literary work after 1395 constituted an apology for the modern writer of morality manuals, for these were a field in which the modern author might labor without guilt. Gerson became a master of the genre, both in terms of productivity and innovation of approach. He emphasized cases and circumstances, for general principles cannot solve moral dilemmas and get turned into strict rules that push people into despair. Preferring the particular to the general, he also saw the value of probability. Absolute certainty in oral affairs is beyond human grasp, so probable truth should be used to cure scruples. The wise doctor of souls could handle and apply the tangle of contradictory opinions in canon law. Gerson himself became such as wise doctor: "Fifteenth-century readers called him 'doctor consolatorius,' one who could guide them out of moral dilemmas that imperiled their souls" (p. 70).

Gerson's later writings, produced during his exile from Paris, his time in Bavaria, and then at Lyons between 1419 and 1429, were bolder than the earlier works. These were his unusual works, such as the *Montessaron,* a long and rambling harmony of the gospels. It was moderately successful, being translated into Middle Low German, and became the subject of a handful of commentaries. At Lyons he also wrote collections of treatises, meditations, and poems. His *Treatises on Songs* (c. 1423) contains the wild study in which Gerson superimposed a "musical checker" (an early clavichord?) onto a chessboard. The resulting figure represents both a musical instrument and a military game, and it was intended to aid faithful pilgrims in spiritual warfare. Gerson defended his bold works on the basis of their utility. Figures of speech can convey spiritual truths, and poetry can inspire moral living. Gerson was not a great or enduring poet. Hobbins assures us that he wrote with too much facility (he produced more than five hundred works) and with too much on his mind. His enduring legacy was in other spheres.

Chapter 4 begins to describe that legacy, connecting author with public by explicating Gerson's understanding of literary expression. Gerson thought and wrote directly and explicitly about the craft of writing. He recognized the importance of rhetorical demonstration, valuing it much more than his scholastic predecessors and contemporaries did. As a university master, he knew how to argue logically, but he also saw the need for arguing in other ways. In *On the Two Kinds of Logic* (1401 or 1402) and *On the Modes of Signifying* (1426), Gerson directly criticized scholarly writing and the schoolmen's habits of mind. He criticized the practice of compilation and the lack of clarity in thought and expression, and he embraced instead the practical rhetoric of preaching. Consequently, he concerned himself with rhetorical problematics such as organization, citations of authors, and the purposes of writing. He admired the power of logic, but also praised eloquence. He chastened his own prose, and defended the authority of schoolmen while rebuking some of their literary practices: "Gerson puzzles us because he represents a path taken but then abandoned--his attempt to harness the learning of the schools, chasten it of its vices, sharpen it with a new and renewed emphasis on expression tuned to the passions of the soul, all as a part of an ambitious program of outreach" (p. 126).

In a letter written in 1400, Gerson called for theologians to write works called *tractatuli* to give instruction on the principal points of the Christian faith "for the simple people" just as physicians used to write to instruct people in certain times of pestilence. His call for the practical tract and his own mastery and wide use of the

genre testify to a wider shift occurring in theology. A public concern was emerging, a broadening of audiences, a change in focus from finding arguments in books "to the investigation of moral, social, and spiritual concerns" (p. 129). Gerson was part of this shift, and a leader of it. Hobbins traces the shift in chapter 5, as it was expressed in the evolution of academic genres. The major academic genres of the thirteenth century--the ***Sentences*** commentary, the collection of disputed questions, and the systematic treatise--gave way to the practical tract by the fifteenth century: "More than anyone else, [Jean Gerson] established this genre as the basic publishing vehicle for theologians" (p. 141). He never published a commentary, and he was known as "the greatest schoolman of his age" (p. 151). The reputation derived from the way he "entered the public arena as no university master before him," from his attempts to "control the terms of the debate" (p. 151). Gerson was not alone, but more than others he capitalized on the new world of wider interests that lay beyond the lecture hall and the commentary.

In chapter 6, "Publishing before Print (1): A Series of Publishing Moments," and chapter 7, "Publishing before Print (2): From Coterie Readership to Massive Market," we see Gerson intentionally pursuing strategies for reaching a wider public within that world of wider interests. Here Hobbins untangles the complex process of publishing in the late medieval world. Publishing before print was slow and terribly complicated, and it depended on a large, elaborate support system. Three stages made up the process: ***before publication,*** the stage of the author's initial delivery of a text; ***author's correction,*** the stage in which the writer "authorized" the text already in circulation by acknowledging he wrote it and revising and correcting it; and ***participation of others,*** the final stage in which scribes, illuminators, or even readers made alterations. Chapter 7 maps out the reading networks that allowed Gerson to become the most popular contemporary author of the fifteenth century, networks that Hobbins identifies as "distribution circles" (p. 16). These included the Council of Constance, the Carthusian empire, and the Council of Basel. Hobbins concludes, "[w]e must never lose sight of the elementary fact that Gerson became the most popular contemporary writer of the fifteenth century because he had felt the pulse of readers, he knew what they wanted and needed, and he adapted his message to them" (p. 185).

Authorship and Publicity is a handsome volume, with fine black and white illustrations, charts, and maps. The notes and general index are thorough, accurate, and helpful. Readers interested in late medieval Germany will be interested in the book's scattered treatments of Gerson's exile in imperial lands. They will find the appendix enlightening, for it shows Gerson's popularity in religious houses located in the German empire ("Appendix: Gerson Manuscripts in Carthusian and Celestine Monasteries"). It confirms the author's claim that important dimensions of Gerson's initiatives in authorship and publicity found their warmest reception in Germany among a group of early humanists, including Jakob Wimpheling.

Hobbins worries that his ruling ideas of authorship and publicity might be too broad, that they might raise some eyebrows. Other readers might suggest a different worry: whether those categories are too modern. Even so, he has convincingly opened up the space described as "neither a specter of decaying scholasticism nor a triumphalist narrative of budding humanism and reform," but instead "a period of creative and dynamic growth, when new attitudes toward writing and debate demanded and eventually produced new technologies of the written word" (p. 339). The old binary opposition does not make ample room for the literate world mirrored in Gerson's impressive career. But readers wrestling with the very specific challenges that authorship and publicity are raising for postmodern public intellectuals right now, especially in the United States, might remind Hobbins of the success of his

own argument. Gerson, the remarkable fifteenth-century man of letters, gains solidity and strength by completely and securely belonging in his category of not-scholasticism and not-humanism. Follow Jacques Le Goff too closely, dismiss Jürgen Habermas too quickly, and insert Gerson too easily into some timeless coterie of public intellectuals, and he might lose the ability to mirror his world.[1] But this is a larger and fairly theoretical discussion point, precisely the type that we have come to expect good books in the Middle Ages Series to stimulate.

Note

[1]. For the challenges of postmodern public intellectuals, one could begin with the articles by Edward Said and Stefan Collini in Helen Small, ed., *The Public Intellectual* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

,

of extent

made

, and thus connects author with public

,