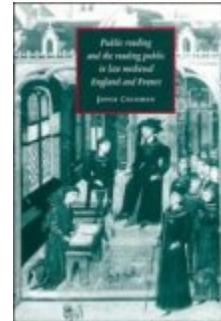


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joyce Coleman. *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xiv + 250 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-55391-9.

Reviewed by Valerie Edden (University of Birmingham)
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Joyce Coleman's book offers an irresistible argument for the importance of public reading as a cultural phenomenon in the late Middle Ages in England and France. The dust-jacket claims boldly that it "offers the first sustained critique of Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy*." In fact, as Coleman herself makes clear, it is not so much that she herself modifies Ong's theory singlehandedly, rather that she builds on the modifications to Ong's theories made by anthropologists such as Ruth Finnegan and Brian Street and applies them to the reception of late medieval literature. It is precisely the judicious cross-fertilization of the disciplines of anthropology, history, and literary studies which is the main strength of this book.

Coleman begins with theory. The first three chapters systematically dismantle the binary opposition between oral and literate, preparing the ground for her case for the importance of public reading (*praelectio*) in the late middle ages. She also challenges the opposition between oral and literate mentalities, coining "endophoric/exophoric" to designate those who can distinguish between self and the environment and have a sense of the past (the "endophoric") from those who cannot (the "exophoric"). Her argument may be summarised thus:

1. There are alternatives to oral/literate/"transitional."
2. The presence of books does not necessarily mean the extinction of orality.
3. Literate listeners continued to hear texts read.
4. "Audiate" audiences were able to internalise and process material which they heard read.
5. It is possible to be illiterate and endophoric (e.g. the

Wife of Bath).

6. It is a fallacy that there was a steady progress from oral to literate with key prompts from technological advance.

The only weak point in her argument is her too easy dismissal of "fictive orality," the belief that poets wrote texts for reading which create an illusion of the speaking voice of the poet and of a hearing audience. Here the issues are more complex than she allows, because poets clearly did create a voice for the speakers of their poems, which was certainly dramatised, and to that extent partially "fictionalised," hence the myriad discussions of narrator-personae; as any television comedian will demonstrate, those who perform in public necessarily create a public persona for themselves. In this, she is right to argue that a read text may be simultaneously heard if it is read to a group, wrong to undermine the extent to which poets constructed speakers and listeners in their texts.

The second part of the book moves from theory to the evidence for public reading provided by literary and documentary sources. Chapter Four is the kernel of the book: an ethnography of reading in late medieval court-orientated society. The evidence used is of references to reading and hearing in texts (often in the doublet "rede and here") and of monarchs and nobles organising public readings and performances of texts. Coleman's case—for the survival of public reading alongside private, individual reading in the late middle ages—is overwhelming.

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