

# Introduction

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## Introduction

No text is an island. Or as Roland Barthes puts it, every text consists of a “tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (146). Texts are surrounded by a swirling conglomeration of other writings, both past and contemporary, all of which have left an indelible imprint. The traces of other texts range from conscious citation to subliminal echoes. Critical interest in the relationships between texts has undergone a sea change since the days when critical debate focused exclusively on tracking down immediate derivation from one or more sources. More recently, the study of intertextuality has broadened to encompass generic conventions and traditions, and to scrutinize questions of cultural interplay. Indeed, Keir Elam (2004) has argued that Renaissance Italy itself provided a cultural intertext for early modern England, offering dramatists and poets a treasure trove not only of literary sources, but of cultural models they could plunder and incorporate into their own work.

In an age when literary influence was not, as Harold Bloom (1973) would later argue, a source of anxiety, *imitatio* was a leading aesthetic principle. Nevertheless, in aesthetic theory a debate raged about the difference between *emulatio* as opposed to *imitatio*. This discussion itself dated back to antiquity. Erasmus, for instance, drew upon Quintilian’s privileging of *emulatio* as the superior art to mock the blind imitation of classical models among his contemporaries (Bate 1989; Pigman 1980). As numerous critics have pointed out, writers have always felt the desire to surpass their precursors and appropriate source material to mould it to their own purposes.

The essays in this volume seek to do more than contribute to the study of the ways texts use other writings as a resource for motifs, topoi, or themes, or alternatively the study of the transmission and adaptation of cultural ideas. Instead, they seek to yoke ideas of textuality to those of identity. The poststructuralist jettisoning of the notion of the stable text

was, after all, indissolubly linked to the postmodernist decentring of the self as the sole source of meaning and action. The idea of an autonomous, unified text was challenged at the same time as identity was claimed to be fragmentary and eternally in flux; the play of indeterminacy of meaning was celebrated in conjunction with a call for acknowledging the plural self. If the text was seen as constituted in dialogue with other texts, identity, too, was no longer conceived as given but as perpetually in process, a construct shaped by a range of cultural forces.

On the one hand, the essays in this volume scrutinize how authors self-consciously appropriate texts circulating within a culture to produce their own identity as writers. On the other hand, the contributors take a closer look at the identity of the text itself and reveal it to be embedded in a dialogue with both earlier texts and contemporary writings. Some of the essays put the very notion of what constitutes a text in question and thus expand the notion of intertextuality. Texts are shown to be in internal dialogue with themselves, for instance in the way marginalia respond to the printed page, or the way paratexts frame and thus help mould the identity of a given text. The role of readers, one to which studies of intertextuality have often given too little credit, are explored in a number of contributions to the volume.

The individual essays range over a wide spectrum of topics. Eric Stanley's paper plays fruitfully with the dialogic dimension of texts by first ferreting out the philological roots of the term 'pre-text' and then addressing the issue in a close analysis of several texts from the medieval period, such as *Beowulf*, *Sir Gowther*, and the Middle English *Pope Gregory*. The essay concludes by challenging intertextuality as a productive hermeneutic mode.

Katrin Rupp reminds us that Chaucer's Miller proposes to offer his audience of pilgrims a "noble" story that he calls "legende" and "lyfe." "The Miller's Tale" shares several points of similarity with the genre of hagiography. A comparative approach to role and representation of the body in "The Miller's Tale," "The Prioress's Tale," and "The Second Nun's Tale" provides an interesting reading of texts that destabilise textual identity in ways that have not been emphasised so far.

Ioana Balgradean argues for a specific expression of emotion in courtly literature, often translated via kinesic and kinaesthetic concepts, in contrast to the more traditional Augustinian theory of emotion that prevailed in the Christian West and that is regarded as one of the pretexts for later medieval narratives. The essay makes a case for an intertextuality that is far from being a mechanical borrowing of authoritative source texts, but rather a complex late medieval appropriation and finessing of values and concepts of emotion as embodied in texts such as *Eneas* and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Ad Putter examines the construction of textual identity by offering a close reading of the word 'thing' in the writings of John Gower, Geoffrey Chaucer, and some mystical texts, including *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Putter shows how these authors make abundant profit of the semantic opacity of the word "thing" to suggest a rich array of possible pre-texts for it. With a detour via F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Putter concludes by arguing for the term's poetic and transcendental potential, offering textual evidence from "The Second Nun's Tale" and the *Cloud of Unknowing*.

David Wallace's project of a European literary history from 1348 to 1400 brings us back to the quote by Barthes that begins this introduction. The account provided by Wallace, which is the inception of an extensive project that will absorb the energies of a large community of scholars, looks at the circulation of influence between sequences of places, away from national boundaries, that constitute centres of culture throughout Europe. Wallace's essay insists on the fluidity and productivity of literary cultures during the period at issue and makes a case for a European literary history that can be best understood if one considers geographical itineraries between the different cultural centres, each in close contact with each other and engaged in a close intertextual and regenerative exchange.

Louise Wilson takes a close look at the paratexts that frame early modern romances. Located at the interstices between the text proper and the reader, they serve as mediators between the romances and their readerships. Wilson argues that paratexts serve far more sophisticated purposes than simply advertising the book to potential buyers. The identity of both readers and the texts themselves are under negotiation. By both defending romances and subjecting them to ironic scrutiny, they attempt to construct an image of their readers that is at once complimentary and playful.

Stephen Orgel focuses on the responses of two individual readers to a specific text, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. As he points out, in histories of the book the role of reception is often undervalued. The marginalia in two folio editions of *The Faerie Queene* give us an intimation of an intense ongoing dialogue between readers and text. The first reader, an angry Puritan, ferrets out moments in the poem that are ambivalent with regard to pre-Protestant forms of belief. The second reader is an admirer of the epic and diligently tries to unravel the intricacies of the plot. The radically diverging stances are an index of the range of responses to the text by early modern readers, and indeed the wide spectrum of Puritan views on offer. They demonstrate how readers use texts to forge their own identity. Paradoxically, they also reveal how in so doing readers construct the identity of texts.

The next two pieces exemplify how a concern with intertextuality can offer new insights into a canonical work. Ladina Bezzola discusses Shakespeare's version of the Lucretia motif in his *Rape of Lucrece*, and shows how by grafting the genre of the female complaint on to his short epic poem, he enables his protagonist to articulate a point of view that has usually been submerged. At the same time, the poem reveals how fraught the attempt is to establish Lucretia as the source of authority in the text. At its best, intertextuality involves the production of a text that surpasses its sources and serves to create authority – both for the writer and, in this case, for the protagonist of the poem. A similar move can be demonstrated in the analysis of small linguistic units – such as the phrase “to be or not to be.” As Regula Hohl Trillini points out, what has now become one of the most iconic of quotations associated with Shakespeare was not his invention. Instead, Shakespeare deployed the words in far more memorable a framework than any of his precursors.

Helen Wilcox examines a wide range of women's writings on death in the early seventeenth century. She looks at an immensely rich if little known corpus of texts, ranging from memoirs and poetry to epitaphs, which revolves around the theme of mourning and loss. The death of children created a specifically female identity of maternal loss, one that leaves a poignant trace in these writings. Helen Wilcox demonstrates how women drew upon cultural models of women's responses to mortality to help shape their texts as well as their own self-image as women writers. Hence intertextuality contributed to the construction of identity on multiple levels. By contrast, Antoinina Bevan Zlatar traces analogies between texts whose relationship has never been previously discussed. She reads the Fall of Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost* alongside the Chester Mystery Plays and charts the changes in the image of Eve's transgression. In Milton's epic idolatry takes precedence over gluttony as the arch temptation imposed on humankind. Milton deploys biblical sources in the service of a Protestant poetics. In a broader sense, medieval ideas serve early modern writers as an intertext which they can appropriate and adapt to serve their own purposes (Carron 574). What was crucially at stake in this dynamic was the self-definition of the writer.

Ranging from the circulation of small textual fragments to the dynamics of cultural exchange within medieval Europe, from textual marginalia to the construction of women's self-image in the face of mortality, the essays in this volume expand the boundaries of the field in hitherto unexplored ways.

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