

Introduction

Medieval Theories of the Creative Act explores ideas of human creativity in the European Middle Ages. Since God is the ultimate Creator, should human creativity be understood as in the image of God, and human artistic achievements as participating in the divine? Or do those who seek to create usurp the divine, exhibiting dangerous hubris and forming works that, like idols, distract human beings from their appropriate worship of God? This volume explores these questions by studying examples of works of art, music, literature and philosophy produced in medieval Europe.

Medieval writers and artists could defend their activity by appeal to tradition: a creative work gains credibility when it is dependent on a precedent work that has already won acceptance and recognition. So painters repeat the compositions, themes, colours of earlier painters, philosophers cite extensively from the work of classical thinkers, poets translate and compile the words of chroniclers, commentators, and other poets, whether writing in Latin or the developing European vernaculars. Alternatively, or more often additionally, artists might claim direct divine validation of their work: for example, a number of medieval women overcame the obstacle of gender to produce texts that they justified as visionary, accounts of what God directly revealed to them, written in response to God's direct instruction.

It is commonly argued that there is a shift, in the later medieval period, from a down-playing of the role of the artist, who is often anonymous, to a focus on the individual skill and imagination of named creative masters. In the realm of painting, Giotto is repeatedly invoked as the first example of an artist valued for his own creative input. In the realm of poetry, Chaucer's self-presentation as translator, compiler, commentator, both invokes and parodies a stance by which a poet eschews the status of *auctor* by clinging to tradition. But have scholars exaggerated this shift? Is it an over-simplification to claim a late-medieval lionization of the artist, and individual artistic creativity, which paves the way for 'renaissance' or 'early modern' attitudes? By crossing the traditional scholarly divide between medieval and renaissance, this volume demonstrates continuities as well as changes, and exposes the limitations of traditional periodisation.

The volume begins with an essay by Jens Ruffer that explores the different terms in which creative activity could be articulated in the Middle Ages. Noting that the medieval world did not distinguish between the 'artistic' and the 'artificial', or between 'artistic' and 'technical' achievement, Ruffer considers the work of medieval craftsmen. His chapter provides a valuable starting point for this book, particularly since it provocatively declares that medieval understanding did not include 'creative acts'.

Tiziana Suarez-Nani outlines the philosophical background to medieval ideas connecting and contrasting human and divine creativity. The thinkers of the Latin

Middle Ages are unanimous as to the fundamental distinction between divine creation and human production: creation is the proper act of God as the primary principle of all things, whereas production is the proper activity of the human being as a creature endowed with reason. Man therefore does not create, but ‘produces’ things which can be concrete and material or abstract and universal. The salient features of creation are uniqueness, the absence of prior material, and conformity with the ideas or examples present in the divine intellect. Similarly, but conversely, human production is characterized by its peculiarity and multiplicity, by the fact that it presupposes a given material and by the use of a form which will provide the model of artisanal or artistic production. As a result, human production imitates both Nature, the object of divine creation, and the work of God as based on archetypes or exemplary ideas: this imitation is conceived in such a way that human production is increasingly related to the creative act of God. In an applied study of these theories of theology and philosophy, Michele Bacci then discusses the capacity of medieval craftsmen to “shape the holy” – art and architecture in sacred spaces reveal human creativity in harmony with ideas of the divine creator.

Insight from the discipline of musicology is offered by the essays of Max Haas and Laurenz Lütteken. Lütteken considers the implications of musical notation for the possibility of understanding the composer as ‘creative genius’. In the ninth century, musical reality was fundamentally changed by the invention of a character only for music – the neume. The shift of the musical tradition from a sphere which was largely confined to orality produced a ‘double writing’: the expression of its own musical inscription, at the end of which musical handwriting stands as a separate type of surplus, and the foundation of an independent musical writing inspired by Boethius. The invention of an abstract musical notation had also considerable repercussions for the creation of music as a profession. Max Haas’s paper explores ways of deconstructing ‘the work’ in the Middle Ages. Tracing the development of *curricula* in relation to commentaries on the works of Aristotle, Haas outlines the relationship between the group, in which *curricula* are formed, and the individual magister, whose opinions may be expressed in commentaries. Haas argues that the relationship between the group and the individual can be observed in detail in the formation of a new notation theory around 1320/25. The theory allows any musical production to be recorded with signs, and provides the basis for the transcription of music-related creativity: this creativity can be understood theologically, or philosophically, based on physics and mathematics.

Is there an idea of a creative act in medieval literature? Almut Schneider’s paper deals with the poetic speech of Konrad von Würzburg as creative act. Walter Haug denied the concept of creativity in the Middle Ages, and at the same time traced a whole series of strategies by which medieval vernacular poets might be seen to undermine this verdict. These strategies are concerned primarily with the content of a poem: Schneider shows further how, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, language itself, as the noblest gift which God has given to man, becomes a ground for the

legitimation of poetical design. Her examples are drawn from Konrad von Würzburg, whose poetics move him close to divine creative power while always observing its difference from the human – *creatio ex nihilo* does not belong to the poet but poetry plays a role in the divine process of creation. Nevertheless, Konrad does not aim at a theological justification for the possibility of poetical design. By developing Gottfried's von Strasbourg's conception of poetry in his portrayal of weaving, pleading, and decorating, he is also concerned with the discourse of poetics: an *exemplum* is Ovid's Arachne, who is closely related to the poet as an artist weaving fabric. Ovid opens up a different perspective: a literary creativity which escapes theological dominance, and seeks to design its own model for the art of poetic speech.

Further exploring creative literary acts, Marco Nievergelt discusses the evidence of the Roman de la Rose tradition, vital to both English and French medieval vernacular literature. His chapter considers 'Textuality as Sexuality' in tellings and retellings of the Roman; in this tradition, imitation is far from stale but rather is dynamic, creating sites in which writers can breathe new life into richly artistically realized re-presentations. However, far from simply celebrating the generative qualities of his own poetry, Nievergelt argues that the poem tends to problematise the act of literary creation by raising the possibility that poetic language itself, relying on oblique transfers of meaning, is fundamentally 'unnatural', idolatrous, even sodomitical and hence sterile – an idea that Jean de Meun develops in particular in relation to the figure of Pygmalion, whose own idolatrous act of creation is evoked just before the poem's obscene conclusion. By staging an act of sexual generation and procreation described in terms of idol worship, Jean does not so much inaugurate a new model of literary authorship as force his later readers to reflect on the nature of literary creation as such: what does poetry actually produce? Nievergelt concludes that Jean highlights the generative qualities of textuality at the expense of the creative agency of the literary author, and thus pushes a number of later fourteenth-century poets, notably Langland and Chaucer, to develop deeply ambivalent, highly complex and often ironic attitudes to their own poetic craft.

Olivia Robinson explores the question of creativity in relation to translation, through the example of Middle English translations from French, particularly those associated with Chaucer. Translations are situated at a point of particular pressure when considering medieval creativity, because all translation involves a tension between the replication of a work and its alteration, between sameness and difference. The authorial *personae* Geoffrey Chaucer creates exemplify this tension: Chaucer invokes and simultaneously parodies an author-translator figure who sticks rigidly close to his venerated Classical source texts. Chaucer has come to be lauded critically as a real innovator: works like the Legend of Good Women use translation into the vernacular to reimagine daringly their Latin predecessors in a variety of complex ways. But translations that are associated with Chaucer but not perceived to follow this trend have fallen into disfavour with modern critics for their apparent literalness and pedestrian-ness, their lack of skill at marking themselves out as sufficiently different, creative or unique. The focus of Robinson's essay is one such translation – the Middle English 'Belle Dame Sans Mercy' – but the essay also draws on a range

of other translated works to explore the tension between sameness and difference within late medieval translations between French and English.

The creativity of compilation in German is explored by Sebastien Coxon through the example of Johannes Pauli's story collection 'Schimpf und Ernst'. Coxon argues that Pauli's presentation of himself as compiler emphasises his life as a preacher monk: his authority is not literary but autobiographical. Pauli is happy to foreground a first person narratorial voice and many passages of his text depend upon his identity as a Franciscan monk and father confessor. 'Schimpf und Ernst' was published in 1522: as a printed work it is the product of a new technology, yet as Coxon argues, it is 'medieval' in its celebration of the authority and authorship of others. Furthermore, the imagination with which Pauli narrates his stories reveals belies the pose of the compiler, since he writes with as much literary creativity as any poet or author of the sixteenth-century.

The topic of creative adaptation/translation is discussed further by Emma Buckley, whose chapter 'Academic authors and classical authorities' delineates the adaptation by scholars at the University of Oxford of Roman authors. Buckley challenges scholarly assumptions that the academic drama necessarily takes a limited and rather old-fashioned approach to source material. It is true, Buckley writes, that plays like William Gager's 'Dido' (1583) or Matthew Gwinne's 'Nero' (1603) embrace the *de casibus* tradition, insist on their moralizing exemplarity, and proclaim their status as firmly homiletic texts: plays, in other words, that bear small resemblance to the exciting, morally challenging and explorative drama of the contemporary vernacular stage. However, Buckley argues that Gager's 'Dido' moves far beyond simple didacticism. Gager does not just reflect upon the feminine fallibility of Dido as a woman who causes the destruction of herself and her city through her inability to control her desires, but uses classical authorities to interrogate more deeply the limitations and possibilities of female rule – no theoretical question during the reign of Elizabeth I. And in the figure of Aeneas Gager applies modern critical thinking to the question of the hero's culpability, and his conflict between passion and duty. Buckley concludes that 'Dido', and academic drama more broadly, is nuanced, politically-engaged and interrogative in its purpose even as it proclaims its conservative and homiletic intent in translating classical literature into drama.

Drama is also the focus of the paper by Elsa Strietman, who describes the concepts of creation in medieval Dutch plays: while Buckley's dramatic material treats secular, humanist developments in drama, Strietman's focus is on religious plays. At a time when Cycle Plays emerge in a number of Western European countries, it is surprising to find that the prolific drama production of the Low Countries is represented in this genre only by two cycles, one in French-speaking Lille and one in Dutch-speaking Brussels. Strietman discusses the context of these plays in terms of the society of the provinces and the producers of drama, and speculates about the structure and the narrative focus of the surviving Brussels plays, only two out of a series of seven.

Strietman also illuminates the stagecraft of the Brussels plays and their presentation of the divine creation.

Helen Swift's chapter on 'Decomposition and Recomposition: Death and Identity in Late Medieval France' considers that a late-medieval proliferation of funerary art and literature (such as literary epitaphs) might provide clues to a new sense of individualism in relation to life and death: such works' concern for memorialisation, a concerted effort exigere *monumentum aere perennium*, their more or less implicit triumph over time and death promoting a 'pré-Renaissance' Petrarchan vision of glory. Swift discusses whether late-medieval funerary art can demonstrate a clear arc towards individualism. Her paper therefore connects with that of Peter Mack, 'Expected responses and linguistic creativity in Renaissance Rhetoric': this paper concludes the volume by looking forward from the medieval, exploring the significance of the perceived renaissance 'shift' in the understanding of the role of the human creator. Together with the essay by Buckley, Mack's essay indicates a shift in the understanding of creativity as a divine prerogative, while nonetheless asserting the continuing significance, to early modern authors, of their training in imitation and adaptation of sources, and their creative dependence on tradition.

The question as to how the medieval world understood creative acts is at once broad enough to facilitate interdisciplinary consultation and specific enough to focus discussion, even though the chapters here presented cover a range of disciplines and languages and also quite a broad time period. Collectively, the essays here presented may create a significant contribution to scholarly understanding of how medieval writers, painters, philosophers and musicians understood their crafts and the fruit they bore.

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