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MEMORY AND CONFESSION IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

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The New Middle Ages

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This book is dedicated to my graduate advisor Dr. C. David Benson with grateful thanks for his guidance, advice, and friendship.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This book examines representative scenes from the narratives of major Middle English authors—Langland, Gower, Chaucer, and the Gawain-Poet. These scenes were chosen because they contain moments in which characters remember or in which there are anxieties relating to forgetfulness. An understanding of memory in this literary context allows deeper insight into narrative construction and character motivation as well as the practice of confession itself. It identifies a way of looking at texts that can improve our understanding of narratives as a whole or specific passages, characters, and themes.

Keywords Memory · Confession · Recollection · Forgetfulness

When I first began noticing memory in a variety of Middle English texts, I thought it merely an intriguing subject. As I became aware that its narrative use was far from random and that authors with varying agendas and intentions often employed memory in remarkably similar ways, I became interested in the history of memory and exploring why its textual construction would have such a common form. This search, initially beginning with the foundational *Confessions* of Augustine and his discussion of memory, led me to the practice of confession and the realization that recollection of past sins is fundamental to this practice. A study of the tradition of medieval confession as well as of the classical and medieval discussions concerning the functions of the soul reveals that

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the act of confessing depends on the act of remembering. Recollection is a constant presence, sometimes implicit and at other times explicit, in theological and practical texts on confession. It is the recognition of past transgressions, which was made present temporally and cognitively within confession, that allows a penitent—at least, ideally—to be forgiven and then to lead a virtuous future life.

Inextricably bound to recollection, the practice of confession, both before and after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which made annual confession mandatory, influenced a vast number of cultural practices, including literary composition. The widespread juxtaposition of confession and memory in Middle English literary texts and how the function of the act of recollection within confession permeated other manifestations of memory as constructed by authors in a variety of genres are examined here. As a result of memory's traditional connection to confession in addition to the recurring awareness of confession's ability to transform the soul, the most dynamic reason that memory or recollection is written by authors into their narratives is to emphasize the reinvention of identity. Thus, through the catalyst of memory, authors can represent transformation in emotional or intellectual understanding that lead, or are intended to lead, to transformations in attitudes or behavior. Conversely, the absence of memory, forgetfulness, can lead either to stasis, the absence of change, or to a flawed identity. In this book, I have chosen representative scenes from the narratives of major Middle English authors such as Langland, Gower, Chaucer, and the Gawain-Poet. These scenes were chosen because they contain moments in which characters remember or there are anxieties relating to forgetfulness. An understanding of memory in this literary context allows a deeper insight into narrative construction and character motivation as well as the practice of confession itself. I do not intend to provide a definitive analysis of any of these texts, but, rather, to identify a way of reading texts that can either improve our understanding of narratives as whole or specific passages, characters, and themes.

At the beginning, it is necessary to provide the functional definitions for three relevant terms—*memory*, *recollection*, and *forgetfulness*. Memory and recollection are complicated words that can refer to multiple concepts. There is a long history of discussion on these terms.

Several medieval scholars were interested in defining them, including such notable figures as Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus in their commentaries on Aristotle's *De memoria et reminiscentia*. In general, the medieval understanding of memory is that it is both the physical location of images of the past as well as the procedure of putting images in mind to be remembered. Minnis (2005) describes a relatively traditional medieval model constructed by the thirteenth-century scholar Bartholomew the Englishman, who identifies memory in relation to other parts of the brain:

> The brain […] is divided into three small cells, the first being *ymaginativa*, where things which the exterior senses perceive "are ordered and put together"; the middle chamber is called *logica*, where the power of estimation is master; and the third and last is *memorativa*, the power of remembrance, by which things which are apprehended and known by imagination and reason are held and preserved in the treasury of memory (3.10). Underlying this account is a psychological model which envisages objects perceived by the five exterior senses meeting in the "common sense" (*sensus communis*), and the imagination, stimulated by these sensations, forming the mental pictures (*imagines* or *phantasmata*) necessary for thought. Images thus produced are handed over to the reason, which employs them in the formation of ideas. These ideas, with or without their related images, are then handed over to the memory for storage.[1]

The concept of memory as a storehouse of images is a common one, appearing in the works such as Augustine's *Confessions*, and is defined by memory-scholar Carruthers (1990) as "a rich model of pre-modern mnemonic practice," "the inventory of all experiential knowledge."[2] Recollection, on the other hand, is the process of bringing these images stored in the memory to the forefront of the mind and is my primary concern in this study as I examine the literary moments when an author depicts a character in the midst of recollection, either through that character relating these moments first-hand or through the text describing a character doing so. In certain stories, these acts of recollection can be pinpointed to one specific moment in the narrative; at other times, they happen without a special emphasis and over a space of narrative time.

As I delved deeper into this topic, it became clear, especially as I talked the idea out with others, that it is frequently not recollection but

the absence of recollection, that is forgetfulness, and its consequences that are highlighted by texts—unsurprising given that forgetfulness can provide a narrative conflict. With respect to forgetfulness, Carruthers comments:

> The whole matter of memory error seems to be quite differently conceived by the ancients from the one that fuels modern anxieties about "making mistakes." For us, "making a mistake" of memory is a failure in accuracy, a failure exactly or "objectively" to iterate the original material. In antiquity and the Middle Ages, problems involving memory-phantasms are described as heuristic (recollective) rather than as reproductive problems, and are due to a failure to imprint the phantasm properly in the first instance, thus causing confusion and recollective loss.[3]

Carruthers is mostly concerned with defining forgetfulness only as it helps in understanding the process of properly training the memory—for instance, in how priests needed to have well-trained memories in order to recall sermons while preaching. It is useful to consider both the anxieties with penitents forgetting sins in confession—and, thus, being unable to be forgiven for these forgotten transgressions since they have not been verbally expressed and atoned for—and literary representations of failing to remember.[4] In confession, there is a distinct "object," as it were, that has left the mind, namely, past sins. We find this same concern in literary texts, such as *Piers Plowman*. In other works, there are moments when characters suffer self-forgetfulness or forget how they are supposed to act, such as when a knight forgets his responsibilities, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Forgetfulness is represented as a failing, even sometimes a sin, which a character must overcome. To complicate matters further, while forgetfulness can be and is represented as negative, it can, in some forms, be positive if it helps an individual better focus on something worthy, for instance God, and prevents them from being distracted by insignificant earthly concerns.

For me, three types of recollection are of primary interest: first, recollecting past behavior and attitudes, especially, but not confined to, those that were sinful or transgressive; second, recollecting the self, as in how one should act or think in order to maintain, refine, or transform personal identity; and, third, recollecting God, that is with the intention of either restoring a relationship with a deity or defining one's faith.

Notes

1. Alastair Minnis, *"Literary* Imagination and *Memory," Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume 2: The Middle Ages*, eds. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 239–274 (239–240).
2. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 34. She provides other synonymous metaphors for the "storehouse," such as "male" (or "travelling bag") and "arca" (or "chest," "box").
3. Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 61.
4. Some scholars—see, for instance, Mary Flowers Braswell, *The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and Confession in the Literature of the English Middle Ages* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Press, 1983), 27—have dismissed the idea that forgetfulness in the confessional was of any substantial concern. However, I argue that it was, on the contrary, an important, or, at least, ubiquitous, point in discussions on confession (Braswell 1983).

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CHAPTER 2

Reducere ad Memoriam: A Brief Overview of Confession and Memory

Abstract A study of the tradition of medieval confession as well as of the classical and medieval discussions concerning the functions of the soul reveals the necessity of remembering in the act of confessing. From the more theological plane of Augustine to the more every-day practicality of confession tracts and manuals, particularly those in the Middle English period, recollection, including anxieties about forgetfulness, is ever-present in the discussions of and the actual act of confession.

Keywords Confession · Memory · Recollection · Forgetfulness · Augustine · Penitentials

At one point in his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine says to God:

> ego tamen confitear tibi dedecora mea in laude tua. sine me, obsecro, et da mihi circuire praesenti memoria praeteritos circuitus erroris mei, et immolare tibi hostiam iubilationis[1]

For more discussion and context of this topic and texts, see my article "Memory, Recollection, and Forgetting in the Middle Ages," *Medieval Culture: A Compendium of Critical Topics*, ed. Albrecht Classen, Fundamental Aspects and Conditions of the European Middle Ages (New York/Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015a): 1020–1038.

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