

The Role of the Audience in Medieval Textual Culture

The term 'audience' embraces a range of participants in textual culture. To consider the medieval audience and the role it played in producing and responding to texts, one must first consider the social climate in which these texts were circulated and received. One must also consider the textual instability of medieval texts, which were 're-created over and over again as they were adapted to different audiences at different periods' (Wogan-Browne 110), a process Zumthor calls *mouvance*. The construction of an audience, therefore, depends upon a number of elements including reception, textual transmission and textual instability.

It is interesting to look at the roots of the word 'audience', which comes into English, via French, from the Latin *audientia*, literally meaning 'a hearing'. This is ultimately derived from the verb *audire*, meaning 'to hear'. Significantly, 'the social systems of the late medieval period were dependent on reading communities and on public forms of textual transmission at all levels' (Wogan-Browne et al. 109). Between 1280 and 1520, before the rise in lay literacy levels and the spread of the practice of silent reading, the *illiterati* audience encountered texts through hearing them being read aloud in a social environment by a literate; or alternatively, they would have heard the text's message being conveyed by an *interpres* [scholarly interpreter]. However, hearing a text was not the only way to receive it.

Before a text reached a large audience, who received it through verbal transmission in a social environment, it reached another, solitary, self-sufficient audience first: the reader. Roland Barthes asserts that 'classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature' (148). The reader constitutes an audience *per se* and thus, one may infer that the audience is tantamount to the reader who 'is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination' (Barthes 148). The importance of the audience in giving meaning to a text went unnoticed until the 1930s because, as Michael Camille observes, 'early text editors were obsessed with origins and establishing the personality of an author' and thus 'they tend[ed] to be unconcerned with audience, with the reception and reading of texts' (392-3).

The way one interpreted a text depended upon the way one received it. The silent, solitary reader may have interpreted a text in a very different manner to the recipient who heard the text being read aloud in a social forum. For example, it is possible that the didactic or pedagogical agenda of a text may not have been fulfilled in an environment where the reader was alone. Another possibility is that due to the silent reader's presumably thorough education in the classics, philosophy, ancient cosmology, astrology and religion, he may have comprehended the didactic message of a text at a deeper level than the way in which a member of the lay audience may have comprehended the very same

text.

The term 'audience' is not one which can be easily defined. The reason for this, quite simply, is because the term itself is not in stasis, nor has it ever been. The meaning of the term 'audience' changed with each social and cultural change during the Middle Ages in order to incorporate new participants and meanings within textual culture. To this day, the meaning of the word continues to evolve in order to correspond with contemporary culture and society.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image - Music - Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill & Wang, 1977. 142-148.

Camille, Michael. "Philological Iconoclasm: Edition and Image in the *Vie de Saint Alexis*." *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper*. Ed. R. Howard Bloch and Stephen G. Nichols. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1996. 371-401.

Wogan-Browne, Jocelyn, et al., eds. *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory 1280-1520*. Exeter: U of Exeter P, 1999.

Zumthor, Paul. *Toward a Medieval Poetics*. Trans. Philipp Bennett. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992.