

# THE MANCHESTER MIDDLE ENGLISH SEMINAR: SIX PAPERS

## PREFACE

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The Manchester Middle English Seminar was founded in 1985 by members of the English Department in the University of Manchester, and it has received full support from the Department, financial and other, ever since. Its existence reflects two linked facts: that several members of staff and students in the English Department were and are particularly interested in Middle English studies, and that Middle English literature has a prominent place in the undergraduate courses. In establishing the Seminar we envisaged it as a forum for both staff and students which would, we hoped, further their interest in the wider subject, taking them beyond their research specialisms and the content of their courses. The Seminar is now established as part of the English departmental scene. The format of talk plus discussion in an informal atmosphere has worked well.

As one would expect, most of the talks have had a literary or literary-cultural bias, with a focus on specifically Middle English writings, especially the work of Chaucer. But from the outset we took a broad view of Middle English and what was relevant to Middle English. We have had talks on French, German, and Spanish literature, on critical theory, drama, music, art history, and history. Not surprisingly, the Seminar has attracted varied audiences. Instead of reinforcing subject introversion the Seminar has acted as a healthy counter to it, in both the intellectual and social senses. In a large civic university still dominated by single honours courses, where the world can easily seem bounded by one's own discipline and one's own department, an opportunity like this for wider contacts is particularly welcome.

Almost all the talks were research-based and offered something to their audiences which was not available elsewhere. Some speakers tried out ideas which they later incorporated in major publications: Alastair Minnis, who gave the inaugural talk on 5 November 1985 on the subject 'Towards a history of medieval literary criticism', David

Aers on 'Desire and the construction of masculine identity in *Troilus and Criseyde*', Anne Wilson on 'Did the *Gawain*-poet use a magical plot?', and Jill Mann on 'Betrayed and betraying women in Chaucer'. Some of the more wide-reaching talks were largely made up of visual or musical presentations. Of this kind were David O'Connor's talk on the east window of York Minster, and David Fallows's history of a medieval French song, 'La bele se siet', with sung illustrations by Deborah Watson and students from the Music Department. A consistently high level of student interest in the Seminar testifies to the fact that our speakers have presented their learning in a lively and accessible way. A forum of this kind is only as good as its speakers, and we are most grateful to all our speakers for their contributions.

The six papers which follow all originated as talks given to the Seminar in the period 1985–91. They have been revised for publication by their authors.

The Manchester Middle English Seminar currently meets four times a year on Tuesdays at lunchtime (1–2 p.m.). The venue is the Poetry Centre in the English Department. If you would like to receive notices of meetings, please write to or telephone Dr John Anderson, Department of English, University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL (telephone 061–275 3169). We warmly welcome to our meetings anyone interested in any aspect of Middle English studies.