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FURTHER READING


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CHAPTER 30

THE POETICS OF PRACTICALITY

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"Quid mihi loqueris? Quid habes operis?" 'What do you say to me? What is your work?'

In this way, the monastic schoolmaster of Alfric's *Colloquy*, a much-anzthologized Latin vocabulary of around the year 1000, queries the boys who come to him, asking that he teach them 'to speak correctly, for we', they say, 'are unlearned, and speak badly' (loqui lataliter recte, quia idiote sumus et corrupite loquimus) (ll. 2–3). So, from the outset of the didactic literary tradition in England, are the arts of discourse — of speaking, of writing, and ultimately, as this essay will suggest, of fiction-making — intrinsically linked to labour and to the practical knowledge that makes that labour efficacious in the world. In response to his students' plea for speech ('locutio') that is both correct ('recta') and useful ('utile') (ll. 5–6), the master leads the boys to assume the roles of agricultural and craft workers — of ploughman and shepherd, of carpenter and blacksmith, to name just a few — and not only to describe but also to justify their daily tasks. "How do you carry out your trade?" ('Quomodo exerces artem tuam?') he asks the 'hunter'; 'what do you work at for our use?' ('quid operaris nobis utilitatis?') he demands of the 'shoemaker'; and 'What do you say ... what is the use of your trade; or can we survive without you?' ('Quid dicis tu ... Cui prodest ars tua, aut si sine te possimus vitam ducere?') he presses the 'baker' (ll. 56, 167, 185–6). Within all these somewhat imperious queries, and especially within the first double-barreled one (what do you say to me? what is your work?), lie some barely concealed assumptions about the relationship of language and action, of speech and practice, and most particularly of Latin literacy and manual labour. For the young oblates, who are being trained ultimately not to perform the tasks of which they talk but rather the *opus Dei*, the work of
prayer, to speak is to work and to work is to speak. And yet to speak, as their master here suggests, is first and foremost to speak of work other than the work of speaking.

The Colloquy—which quickly becomes a contest among the workers for pride of place (with the victory given to the monk on the one hand and, over the blacksmith’s rather vociferous dismay, to the ploughman on the other (ll. 213–28))—is a fascinating text; it has long been recognized, and continues to be studied, for the way it opens up any number of windows upon the linguistic, social, technological, and of course pedagogical systems and situations of Anglo-Saxon England.3 I turn to it here, however, as a useful springboard for some reflections about what my title refers to as the ‘poetics of practicality’ in the didactic literature of medieval England. My title might first, understandably, seem to imply an interest in the practicality of medieval poetics. In the opening of his Poetria nova (c.1215), for example, Geoffrey of Vinsauf famously compared the writing of a poem to the building of a house, an architectural analogy still very much alive for Geoffrey Chaucer when he made use of it almost two hundred years later in his Troilus and Criseyde.4 More generally, all medieval literature is arguably to some degree ‘practical’, in the sense of ‘didactic’; even the most outrageous of fictions produced over the course of the Middle Ages were potentially justifiable as utile (useful) no matter how dolce (sweet) they might be.

But, rather than discuss the way imaginative fictions like Chaucer’s narrative poetry or non-fictional works like Vinsauf’s manual were either intended to be or (mis)understood as useful, and also leaving aside the very complicated issue of what constitutes the ‘literary’ in any age, I propose to undertake a different, more thorny, perhaps even pig-headed task. I will consider whether insistently practical texts, those whose explicit goal is to assist their readers to make something in the world beyond the page (a book, a culinary dish, an ointment, an object), might be said to have a poetics and, if so, in what that poetics might be said to consist. I take my inspiration in part from Michel de Certeau’s assertion that ‘the narrativizing of practices is a textual “way of operating” having its own procedures and tactics’.4 But de Certeau is here referring to the way theorists of culture such as Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud write (or wrote) about what they do, I want to ask whether the ‘narrativizing’ of even the most mundane of medieval practices by mostly anonymous writers can also be said to have its own ‘procedures and tactics’, if such procedures and tactics can indeed be identified. I also want to ask how this attempt of identification might help us to read more profitably in and across the other genres that make up the (admittedly ever-shifting) canon of medieval English literature.

But before I go any further in outlining, in a deliberately exploratory fashion, what is perhaps a massively impractical project (for reasons that are frustrating and exciting in equal measure), I want to explain my omission of another set of texts and concepts that a reader coming to an essay on medieval practical or didactic literature might well be expecting. I will not be considering exempla collections, courtesy manuals, spiritual guidebooks, and other works of this sort, not only because these kinds of texts have received a great deal of recent scholarly attention (including elsewhere in this volume),5 but also because, as fictions about—as well as scripts for—the drama of living in the world and preparing for the afterlife, such works lend themselves almost de facto to the kind of analysis that literary scholars are used to performing. Particularly as they were written in the later Middle Ages, instructions on how to behave in spheres both secular and sacred tend to come already complete with implied and often explicitly fleshed-out characters, a plot (even if that plot is understood simply as the tracing of the crooked line between birth and death), and a conflict (to use a medieval cliché, the constant battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil). We have at our disposal any number of ways to read stories of this sort as stories, just we also have many strategies for thinking about the urgent admonitions of such texts, which tend to shape behaviour largely by policing and prohibiting (‘avoid this, don’t do that’, and so forth).

But how we might best read the largely untapped reserve of what I would call positive or productive instruction to which medieval English readers turned for help in shaping (or fixing) themselves and the world around them is almost as uncertain as the genre is vast. In addition to works like encyclopedias, calendars, dream-books, and other interpretative volumes, the ‘how-to’ texts of medieval English culture (a loose but nonetheless quite visible category of textual production that has to date gone largely ignored, even in critical tomes as ‘broad and inclusive’ as The Cambridge History of Middle English Literature6) proffer an extensive syllabus of practical knowledge: herbal books, leech-books, surgical treatises, lapidaries, cookbooks, houndery manuals, hunting tracts, and more.7 The producers and owners of

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6 In this volume see Stephanie Trigg’s chapter on ‘Nurture’, and its thorough bibliography, which I will not reduplicate here. See also Elizabeth Allen, False Fables and Exemplary Truth in Later Middle English Literature (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
8 See George R. Keiser’s indispensable Works of Science and Information, vol. x of Albert E. Hartung (ed.), A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1000–1500 (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of
these works seem to have been far more optimistic than Pierre Bourdieu about the relationship of language to practical activity. While Bourdieu insists that 'the essential part of the modus operandi which defines practical mastery is transmitted in practice, in its practical state, without attaining the level of discourse', those who penned and those who read medieval works of practice in prose and verse certainly seem to have put their faith in discourse as a reliable transmitter, if not of mastery, then at least of basic competence, in quite a staggering variety of disciplines.

Here we might pause to note that Chaucer, despite his allusion to the Poetria nova's practical poetics (not to mention his own practical composition, the Treatise on the Astrolabe), seems to have shared Bourdieu's much later scepticism. In the 'Canon's Yeoman's Tale', he gives us an apprentice who has discovered that the art of alchemy is a scam no matter how much it is either verbalised in 'terms ... so clerkish and so queynye' or how much it is performed with 'care and wo' in the workshop (VIII. 752, 769). In this tale, both a discourse and the practice it claims to teach are revealed as equally deceptive and equally disappointing. 'For all our sleightes', the luckless worker who has learned this hard lesson complains, 'we can not conclude'; indeed, the only conclusion he has reached is that 'oure labour is in vein' (VIII. 773, 777), fruitful only in the sense that its frustrations make for a good story on the road to Canterbury. But Chaucer's send-up of practical knowledge is not limited to the notoriously obscure craft of turning base metal to gold and the related, equally fruitless quest for the Philosopher's Stone; in fact, with the exception of the devout Parson and his silent 'brother' the Ploughman (II. 529), no pilgrim on the road to Canterbury escapes the poet's sardonic eye, particularly when it comes to the practice of his or her profession. Even more pertinent for the purposes of this discussion, in the 'Squire's Tale' Chaucer presents us with a group of readers who, while well versed in practical texts, are still unable to make much sense of the world-travelling brass horse, fortune-telling mirror, all-conquering (and all-healing) sword, and bird-decoding ring that have been presented to Genghis Khan. They know of classical texts on optics and perspective, and are informed, apparently also through their reading, about the crafts of metal-smithing, medicine, and glass-making (V. 225–62). Yet their discursive knowledge of these practical arts—limited, Chaucer seems here to suggest, precisely because it is no more than discursive—does not bring them any closer to understanding the gifts. The Squire rather cuttingly identifies this problem in a comment that, while it specifically dismisses the crowd's fear that the brass steed may be a new Trojan Horse, clearly applies to its members' subsequent bewilderment before the three remaining magical objects as well:

Of sondry doutes thus they jangle [chatter] and tret [debate],
As lewed [ignorant] peple demeth [judge] comunly
Of thinges that been maid moore subtly
Than they kan in hir lewednesse comprehende;
They demen gladly [habitually] to the badder end.

(V. 220–3)

Some six hundred years in advance, Chaucer is here effectively anticipating Bourdieu's warning that 'artificially wrenching ... from their conditions of production and use' the 'practical taxonomies' that serve as 'instruments of cognition and communication' and subjecting them to 'strictly internal analysis'—as the 'lewed' folk of the 'Squire's Tale' do, particularly when they examine the mirror and ring—will always 'fail[!] to understand their [that is, the instruments'] social functions' (p. 97). But as the written traces of mostly vanished practices, and particularly the productive kind in which I am most interested, medieval works of instruction have for us, much more so than for the crowd in the 'Squire's Tale', always already been wrenching out of context. And so, despite the risk of ending up merely mired in inconclusiveness like the Canon's Yeoman, what Bourdieu calls 'internal analysis' and what I would call a close reading does not seem like such a bad place to start.

The most naked encounter between the symbolic order of words and material practice occurs in the place where this essay began—namely, vocabularies, a staple of English pedagogy from the Colloquy to the early modern period and even beyond. Throughout the centuries of their popularity these word-books served as tools for a literate elite attempting to come to terms with—by defining the terms for—the social, intellectual, and commercial value of artisanal practice. What I want to emphasize here, however, is not their variously expressed ideologies but rather their shared impulse, irrespective of the circumstances of their production, to transport ments.


10 For a reading that sees a similarly pessimistic view of technical knowledge in a different poem, see Andrew Galloway, 'Chaucer's Former Age and the Fourteenth-Century Anthropology of Craft: The Social Logic of a Premodernist Lyric', English Literary History, 63 (1996), 535–53.

11 We might note that the Squire himself is rather like the crowd he mocks, in that he appears to know what makes a 'rhetor [rhetorician] excellent'—something he could have learned from a manual like Vinsant's Poetria nova—yet declares himself unable to speak as one (V. 34–41). This is a self-criticism that the Franklin actually ratifies when he cuts short the Squire's meandering narrative (V. 673).

12 A full study of English practical texts would have to include a consideration of their manuscript contexts, and the history of their production and circulation; it would also take into account, in a much more specific way than I can here, the many different types of practical literature within the mega-genre that constitutes the larger field, and consider their conceptual as well as thematic similarities and differences. Such questions are not truly extricable from the formal issues upon which I somewhat artificially concentrate in this essay, but they are beyond its present scope. On some of the issues raised by the clash of aesthetic form and social function in Middle English exemplary texts see Allen, False Fables, 22–6.

13 As I suggest at greater length in Lisa H. Cooper, Crafting Narratives: Artisans, Authors, and the Literary Artifact in Late Medieval England, currently in progress.
ease, has narratological implications; once they are embedded in descriptions of imagined situations, vocabulary words take on a life of their own that is quite distinct from the external reality they are attempting to encompass. As Gérard Genette observes, 'every narrative introduces into its story an “emploting” which is already a “fictionalizing”'.16 And in fact, the more contextualized they are, the more medieval collections of verbal facts acquire the characteristics not simply of narrative in general, but of various kinds of medieval fiction in particular. Nequam’s observations in the De nominibus utensilium upon another craft, that of weaving, provide a case in point, for they open with a remarkable set of images for the operation of the loom:

Textor terestris eques est, qui duarum streparum adimitis apodientam, equum admittit assidue, exili tamen contentum dieta. Scansionis autem, eius fortune conditionem representantia, mutua gaudent vicissitudo, ut dum unum exvehitur, reliquam sine nota livoris deprimitur.

[A weaver is an earthly knight, who leans upon two stirrups and who gives rein constantly to the horse, content with a short journey. But the stirrups, representing the condition of his fortune, enjoy mutual vicissitudes, since when the one goes up the other is depressed without any indication of rancor.17]

Here Nequam translates craft labour into the language not only of chivalric living, but also of chivalric literature. This is, however briefly, weaving as romance, governed by an uncharacteristically benign Fortune. Another genre makes its appearance near the end of the same book’s description of the goldsmith’s workshop, when technical instruction begins to become a cautionary tale about the perils of the market, one made more dramatic by way of the kind of language with which exempla and fable collections of this and later periods are rife. The goldsmith’s apprentice, Nequam warns, ‘must know how to distinguish solid gold from brass and copper, that he may not purchase brass for gold’ (‘Aurum etiam obrizum sciat discernere ab oricalco, a cupro ne pro auro elico emat auricalcum’); furthermore, he adds, ‘it is difficult to escape the wiliness of the fraudulent merchant entering the forge’ (‘grave est institoris pellacis effugere tergiversationem faberabitum subtrinantis’).18

I may have been hasty in saying that I wanted to avoid ‘admonitory’ texts in this attempt to get some kind of a purchase on the language and literature of practicality. For, in the Middle Ages as now, the first step in being practical, no matter what one is saying, doing, or making, is to be careful. So, in fact, the warnings embedded in practical texts of all kinds may be the very places where such works, even the most non-narrative in design, stretch themselves to the fullest extent of their potential eloquence. In a collection of medical recipes from the mid-fifteenth century, for

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17 Hunt, Teaching and Learning Latin, 184–5; see also 'The Treatise De nominibus', 106; trans. from Holmes, Daily Living, 146, with some slight alteration.

18 Hunt, Teaching and Learning Latin, 189; see also 'The Treatise De nominibus', 119. The translation of the first phrase is from Holmes, Daily Living, 143; the translation of the second phrase is my own.
example, a simple list of things to avoid in order to protect the eyes becomes a vocabulary of daily (but not dull) danger, a kind of compressed epic of potentially hazardous experience:

Thou must knowe or thou com tomedecyns that pies thyngeis bene euell for the syght in the eyghen moch lechery for to loke moch on schynynge tymes [images] and for to rede moch on small lett(er)s to slepe at noone after the mete (and) he that hat fadele in hyes syght muste be ware that he et nat ere mete th(at) he ete before be defede [digested] and drunkennes and for to brake [vomit] before mete and to moch sleepe and to moche blode latynge w(ith) cupynge all man(er) of metes th(at) bene salte and sharpe and stronge wyne that is truly [tisuged] and thike lekes onyons yte euyes anete [dill] worls of cole [cabbage] and rygges garlyke wyne benes smoke fyre fume hoote blode grete travalle laughynge chese wepyngge pep(per) strokys [blows] mustarde and moch wakyngye

A text, writes Genette, 'is literary... for someone who is more concerned with its form than with its content—for someone, for example, who appreciates the way it is written even while rejecting or ignoring its meaning' (Fiction, 17). My own appreciation of this passage from the leech-book might be accused of just this kind of ahistorical bias; what strikes me as quirky and compelling and drives me to read this book (albeit, pace Genette, as much for its content as its form) is probably not what primarily interested its owner. Then again, this work, like others of its kind, does seem occasionally to relish its own verbal flourishes in a way that leads me to wonder if my reading is so ahistorical after all. Note, in particular, the breathless and rather exuberant catalogue—'figs, garlic, wine, beans, smoke, fire, fume' and so forth—at the end of the passage quoted above. Likewise, another passage in the same book makes the following increasingly triumphant declarations about the virtues of blood-letting:

it clerith thith thought it closith thit bladder it te(m)p(er)ith th(y) breyn it amendith thyne heynynge it styrngth teres it closith thit maw it defeth [digests] thit mete it clerith thy voyce it sharpenith the witt it eaisith thit wembe [stomach] it gerdith [gathers] thit slepe it draweth away angwyshse it notrisshith goode blode wykked blode dyestroth and lengthith thy lye.

The appearance of such material in Middle English verse as well as in prose (many poems on blood-letting, in particular, survive) may deserve more critical consideration by students of medieval literature than it has received. Although the

versification of much practical knowledge in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries tends to be explained away as mnemonic device, we might want to ask whether (like their classical forebears, who were entertained as well as instructed by the didactic verse of Lucretius and Virgil) medieval readers did not themselves take aesthetic enjoyment from practical literature. That at least one reader found some degree of pleasure in practical texts is suggested by the Middle English version of a Latin agricultural handbook by the fourth-century writer Palladius. Translated c.1442–3 for Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, the dedication copy of the work is equipped with a textual apparatus, including an alphabetical table of contents, that points to its having been created with a practical function in mind (this despite the fact that some of its advice, such as that for growing olives in a Mediterranean climate, would be difficult for an English landowner to follow). But the work's form—rhythm royal stanzas—suggests, as George R. Keiser observes, 'that delight was at least as important as instruction' to the work's conception (Works of Science and Information, 3596).

John Lydgate, the most prominent poet of Duke Humphrey's circle, seems to have shared as well as encouraged his patron's appreciation of the practical rendered in and as poetry. Within Lydgate's vast and largely didactic corpus, several little-studied works stand out not only because they present technical information in verse, but also because their practical content is in one way or another an integral part of their poetic form and function. The short 'Trettise for Lavendres', for example, reads on its surface as a set of versified instructions for washerwomen; however, as Maura Nolan demonstrates in a forthcoming essay, the poem is actually 'embedded within a devotional discursive network' that includes biblical passages on the cleansing of sin, Marian lyrics, and vernacular allegories like Pier of Plowman. The singular


The Minor Poems of John Lydgate: Part II: Secular Poems, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, EETS, os 192 (London: Oxford University Press, 1934). 723. All other references to Lydgate's poetry are to this volume and will be made in the text.

19 Warren R. Dawson (ed.), A Leechbook or Collection of Medical Recipes of the Fifteenth Century (London: Macmillan, 1934), 169–70. I have spelled out abbreviated letters in brackets.

20 Ibid. 65. Part of the texture of these two passages is determined by the placement (and the absence) of the word 'and', whose multiple functions William Gass has usefully analysed in 'And', in Allen Wier and Don Hendrie Jr. (eds.), Voicestuff: Eight Contemporary Fiction Writers on Style (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 101–25.


23 The Poems of John Lydgate: Part I: Religious Poems, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, EETS, os 192. For more references to Lydgate's poetry see this volume and will be made in the text.

'Debate of the Horse, Goose, and Sheep', a kind of bickering bestiary, takes as its central theme the use-value of the animals who speak its words, right down to the sheep's explanation of the precise end to which each of his body parts may be put: his wool for cloth, his skin for gloves and parchment, his tail and (boiled) head for medicinal ointments, his intestines for harp strings (pp. 554–5, ll. 351–85). And consider the long section on the humours, uracropy, and phlebotomy in Lydgate's *Fabula duorum mercatorum*, of which I reproduce the central stanzas:

Effymera [ephemeral fever] hath his original
Whan mannyx spiritys been in distemperaul,
Or in-to excess yif a wight [person] be fal.
Of mete and drynk thurough mygovernaunce;
Of accidentis, of thought, of perturbaulce,
Of hooth, of cold or greef in any maneer
This feure cometh, as auctor tellen heer.
And putrida is causyd gladly thus:
Whan any humour synmeth in quantite,
Or whan his floowyng is to plenteous,
That he exceedith mesure in qualite.
Yff by blood, anoon ye may it see;
Yff quantitie othert erro, espyeth it thus,
The feure in physicke is calld sinochus.
And, yff the humour in qualite exceedith,
Or heete or blood passe his temperament,
In-to a fevere anoon a man it leedeth
Clephith synchose by patreffacion shent [ruined].
And, yff of colra he take his groundement,
Pure or vnpure, citryn or vitelynye [deep yellow],
Gyles you techith to luge it by vynce.

(p. 496, ll. 288–308)

Some time ago, this passage, among others of a similar informational nature, led Derek Pearsall to 'confess to a certain bafflement' regarding the poem's story even as he admitted that 'as an exercise of style it is superb'. But story and style are I think inseparable, and perhaps nowhere more so than in this passage about physical 'excess'. Drawn almost directly, or so it would seem, from a leech-book like the one I have already quoted, or else adapted from one of many blood-letting poems in circulation, in the *Fabula* the passage actually turns practical knowledge into a poetic game. For Lydgate uses it to highlight, in ironic fashion, the way the love-sick merchant to whom its terms are applied is actually suffering not from a bodily surfeit but rather from the (seeming) impossibility of ever possessing the woman he desires since she is engaged to his best friend, the second merchant of the title. Furthermore, the concepts of surplus and lack that Lydgate appropriates here from the medical profession also operate as figures for the financial profit and

loss experienced by the two merchant-protagonists in the marketplaces where they practise their skill.

So in the vocabulary tradition does the marketplace increasingly appear both as the inspiration for further fictionalizing and also, thematically speaking, the locus of fiction—in the sense of fraud—*par excellence*. 'Deceitful drapers, led on by excessive greed', writes John of Garland in another popular word-book, the *Dictionarium* of c.1220, 'defraud buyers, badly measuring cloths with a short ell and false lengths' (§ 41). The anxiety attendant upon possibly being deceived in the market—rather than, say, using the wrong word, since the vocabularies themselves (at least in theory) prevent that unfortunate occurrence—is in fact a central theme of one of the latest and most elaborate of medieval English word-books, Caxton's *Dialogues in French and English* (c.1483). This bilingual phrasebook, a guide for travelling merchants, includes (along with an alphabet of artisans and many other short vignettes) a complete script whereby a buyer and seller of cloth move from friendly greeting through mutual suspicion, tense disagreement, eventual accord, payment, and courteous farewell (pp. 15–19).

Caxton's vocabulary implies by the simple fact of its printed existence the idea that anyone who would buy the book and equip himself with the language the text offers to teach can learn to be a merchant. This suggestion—that is, that discourse can lead seamlessly to practice, and not just to the practice of proper speech, but also to other types of productive activity—is made more explicitly in the opening of another late medieval manual, John Russell's *Boke of Nurture*. This work, composed around 1460 by an upper servant in the household of Humphrey of Gloucester, was meant not for a wide audience but rather for young boys raised in the households of noble men. But its opening gambit—a dialogue between an older, wiser man and a young one looking for a master—is the suggestion that such a work can in fact teach a willing learner any skill pertaining to any occupation, no matter where it falls on the social ladder: 'Now, son, yiff y the teche, wiltow any thynge here?' the older figure asks his new young acquaintance. 'Wiltow be a seruaunde, plowghman, or a laborere, or Courtyour or a clerk Marchaunde or masoun, or an artificere Chambrayloun, or buttilere pantere or karvare?' (ll. 37–40). The

26 *Parnassii, nimia cupiditate ducti defraudant emptores, male uliendo pannos cum ulna curta et cum pollice fallacis* (Hunt, *Teaching and Learning Latin*, 199); for an English translation of this work (based on a different manuscript from that edited by Hunt), see The *Dictionarium* of John de Garlande, trans. Barbara Blatt Ruben (Lawrence: ES: Coronado, 1981).


nature of the text demands that the boy choose, as he immediately does, the last four options of learning to serve in chamber and at table. But what is striking here, particularly if we think back to the Colloquy's much earlier and only temporary assignment of roles, is the idea of occupational freedom.30

The statement that the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in England were characterized by increasing social and professional mobility, at least or especially for those of bourgeois status, has become a truism. But the concept of choice is also an essential part of any poetic we might ascribe to practical works. In the later Middle Ages, most of these kinds of texts, along with many other kinds of literature, were sought out by precisely those on upward mobility was indeed an option.31 This genre's seeming (if not actual) availability to and potential utility for all comers was already one of its characteristics in the early thirteenth century, as we saw above in the latent suggestion of Alexander Nequam's De nominibus utensilium that its reader might, by following its instructions, do some work in the goldsmith's shop. Practical texts both early and late, and however limited or broad their circulation, present a slew of options—areas of expertise, methods within those areas—and leave it up to the reader to select from among them depending on his or her need or even desire.32 In the Boke of Nurture, the world of practice is presented as the young man's oyster, and only after being asked to choose from a wide professional spectrum does he opt to learn with what sauce a dish of real oysters should be served (according to this book, one of chives or grasy (L. 822)).

Recipes for sauces and descriptions of the foods to which they are applied themselves make for their own kind of drama, and not just one of the palate. Although works like the Boke of Nurture and other late medieval recipe collections present something of an obdurrate 'centre of resistance' to close analysis,33 I am nevertheless struck by the 'narrative' hinted at in the Boke of Kervynge (Wynkyn

30 The same idea, albeit in its negative form, also appears in a poem uniquely preserved in Yale University, Beinecke Library, MS 163, in which a father forbids his son not only the risky profession of court counsellor, but also 'in[la]sons cratte and all clymyngye, | And shippmen cratte for perell of clothe' (fl. 2–3). This is more of a conduct poem than a technical treatise, to be sure, but it might also be considered severely practical in its insistence that wise men (and their sons) avoid the bodily dangers of manual labour. Notably, the manuscript in which this warning appears is otherwise a compendium of practical material, including texts on medicine, herbs, and falconry (Keiser, Works of Science and Information, 3596). The poem is edited in Roger Lass, 'Three Middle English Cautionary Lyrics', Anglia, 83 (1965), 172–5; on its use of the trope of the wise parent to proclaim its authority see Cameron Louis, 'Authority in Middle English Proverb Literature', Floridsheim, 15 (1998), 85–123, at 93.


de Worde's prose adaptation of the verse Boke of Nurture, first printed in 1508) in its directions for dressing a capon: 'Take up a capon, and lyfte up the ryght legge and the ryght wynde, & so araye forth & laye hym in the plater as he shold be flee, & serve your soverayne.'34 If on the one hand the suggested 'array', or display, of the dressed but still seemingly fleecing bird is its own kind of fiction for the table, the arrangement of the instructions in this part of the Boke of Kervynge attain their own kind of verbal as well as visual rhythm:

Dysmembre that heron

Take an heron and reyse his legges, and cut of his wynges as a crane and sauce hym with wynegre mustarde poudre of ginger and salte.

Unionte that byttre [bittern]

Take a byttre & reyse his legges & his wynges as an heron and no sauce but salte onely.

Breke that egryt

Take an egryt and reyse his legges and his wynges as an heron and no sauce but salte.

(p. 162)

This section of the book in fact elaborates upon the display proffered on its first page, a list of the 'Termes of a Kerwer' laid out without any further explanation (it is not really a table of contents) except, it seems, to bewilder the reader with its sheer variety and so impress upon him his need to read on (since the first half of this list appears elsewhere in this volume (see p. 467), I quote only the second half of it here):

unionte that byttre
vtache that curlewe
alaye that fesande
wyne that partryche
wyne that quayle
myncce that plouer
thy [thigh] that pegyon
border that pasty
thy that woodcocke
thy all maner of small byrdes
tybmbr [timber] that fyre [fire]

(p. 151)

This last passage is in many ways a neat précis of the narratological interest and set of problems that practical literature presents. The opening of the Boke of

Kervynge is a prime, if late, example of an 'intersection' of several practical genres with one another. It is at once a (mostly avian) bestiary, a vocabulary (of verbs), and a conduct book (for the kitchen if not the table). But it is something more as well. As Hayden White notes of the entries in the much earlier Annals of St Gall, 'It may be a mistake to call it discourse at all, but it has something discursive about it. The text summons up a "substance."'5 White, as his placement of the word in quotation marks suggests, means 'substance' somewhat metaphorically, but medieval practical works like those I have considered in this essay literally 'summon up a substance' by definition: they ask their readers to make (or at least give them the option of making) the things to which they refer.

In fact, 'summon up' is not quite the right phrase. Though medieval practical works have an even more pronounced incantatory form than that which White senses in the Annals, their incantations— or, better, their more-or-less urgent imperatives—are, with perhaps the exceptions of alchemical poems and versified charms, far more mundane than magical. Furthermore, unlike the forms of historia upon which White focuses his attention, works of practical instruction have a rather indeterminate relationship to time, an indeterminacy that effectively redoubles their 'summoning' power by allowing them to gesture in two temporal directions at once.

What I mean by this is that, on the one hand, practical literature lays claim to authority by pointing, at least implicitly, towards a past act that has met with success (this is, at any rate, the leap of faith a credulous reader must make). On the other hand, practical texts, unlike much medieval historiography, are designed less to narrate the probable past than they are to represent the quite literally possible future, if—and this, as I have already mentioned, is a key condition— their reader(s) should choose to follow directions. Moreover, in the present moment of their being read they are also outlines, or sketches, of tangible content— of the things, the stuff—that their users may choose (or not) to add to the world around them. At the same time, as literary artefacts, medieval practical works also and already have a verbal content, and any number of forms, of their own. This is something that their readers, quite as much as their writers, appear to have understood and relished. The appeal of the how-to in text later medieval England is something that literary critics have yet fully to grasp; but, practically speaking, in exploring the genre's intricate marriage of form and content, variously embodied in an amazingly copious corpus, we may find much more 'work' to do.

55 Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 9. I thank Jacques Lezra for discussing this idea and many others in this essay with me.