

Editorial

WHY SHOULD ANYONE nowadays care about medieval culture? This question is not addressed or even raised by any of the authors represented in the pages that follow. Nor should it be. The contributors to this issue are virtually all specialists in one or another aspect of medieval culture. They have spent years of their lives acquiring the knowledge and skills they need to be scholars in this field; each of them has long ago decided that the study of medieval culture matters a great deal for reasons that doubtless vary considerably from one individual to the next. After settling the question in his or her own mind, a scholar gets on with the task at hand, and needn't be enquiring endlessly into the ultimate value of the work being done.

If the medieval scholar weren't permitted to suspend the question of value in this way, it would be impossible for him or her to devote the time and energy required to achieve mastery of a highly demanding discipline. Take the question of language as an example. The contributors to this volume, as a group, are conversant in varying degrees with Latin, Greek, Old English, Old Norse, Old French, Anglo-Norman, and Middle English (in several different dialects). In addition, they are able to decode manuscripts, to interpret iconographical figures, to explicate theological arguments, and to situate their enquiries within precise geographical and historical contexts. For me, as a reader with only minimal competence in a few of these highly specialized mysteries, this great expertise of medieval scholarship looks like a formidable (collective) achievement. And indeed it is. Thanks to the dedicated, painstaking work of many specialized scholars, the culture of the Middle Ages remains accessible to us, despite the many decisive changes in language, religion, politics, ethics, and *mentalité*.

But if medievalists themselves are permitted to set aside the question of value in order to develop their special expertise, the

same isn't true for ordinary readers. We are still left asking: who cares? What does medieval culture have to offer us? Perhaps the best answer to this question comes about by indirection: reading the various explorations of medieval culture in the pages that follow will suggest implicitly the value of engagement with a world of ideas and images and expectations quite unlike those that prevail in our own place and time. Thus, under the heading *Court* you will find Melissa Furrow's account of what it was that medieval readers found so striking in the story of Tristram, Isolde, and King Mark; a poetic interrogation of Louis IX, King of France, by John Nixon, Jr.; and an explication of the acoustic dimension of hunting in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by Sandy Feinstein. Under *Clergy* you will encounter a rehabilitation of Chaucer's Pardoner by Richard E. Zeikowitz, and a redefinition of the monastery as a sponsor of musical culture by Bryan Gillingham. Elizabeth Edwards' treatment of sexual (mis)behaviour in two of Chaucer's comic tales, and Jenny Rebecca Rytting's rediscovery of domestic virtue in Gower's work, are gathered under the rubric *Household*. Two articles on what would have been mainstream philosophy in the Middle Ages, Philip Rose's treatment of human creativity in Nicholas of Cusa, and Sharon M. Kaye's discussion of William of Ockham as a proponent of metaphysical freedom, appear under the heading *Divinity*. It is my hope that one or more of these works, or perhaps one of the book reviews which follow them, will persuade you that encountering medieval culture is a worthwhile adventure for its own sake.

Still, the question I began with deserves a systematic answer as well. Why care about medieval culture nowadays? First, because it is part of our heritage. For anyone who occupies a place in Western civilization, medieval culture is part of what produced the world we live in. Without some knowledge of its texts and symbols, we can't understand courtly love, or chivalry, or holy relics, and the imprint these notions have left on the world we still inhabit. Perhaps more important, the study of medieval culture gives us access to a particular kind of otherness—a culture that is unlike our own, that is governed by conventions we no longer find familiar, but which we can claim as our own nonetheless. If we value the traces of otherness within our culture, the medieval heritage will offer us a rare and special opportunity to see ourselves not

simply reflected but resituated in a world that both is and is no longer our own.

Putting together a volume of this kind would be impossible without the generosity of a large community of medieval scholars. I take this opportunity to thank these learned men and women for advice about matters ranging from the merits of a particular article to the techniques for electronic reproduction of Middle English characters. Two special kinds of assistance deserve particular mention. Patricia Chalmers, Assistant Librarian at the University of King's College, made available the fifteenth-century book of hours from which the images on our cover have been reproduced. Gail LeBlanc, of Dalhousie Graphics, created a design that respects the beauty of these manuscript materials but adapts them to the needs of *The Dalhousie Review*. The cheerful collaboration of many people, including those just mentioned, has made editing our medieval culture issue a pleasure; my hope is that readers of the texts presented here will find pleasure in them too.

R.H.