Preface

> The comments are not always what we should expect, that is, if we cling to the widely disseminated idea . . . that the mediaeval reader, spiritually sharpened by a training in allegory, heard nothing but the mystical overtones in Ovid's works, such as the *Art of Love.* How disappointing to find that the *intentio scribentis* in the *Amores,* according to one of these commentators of the twelfth century, is—*delectare!* Only this and nothing more. What a vista is opened by these few words—a vista into the mediaeval mind!—E. K. Rand

This book is intended as a contribution to the history of medieval literary thought. It deals with an aspect of the subject that modern scholarship has paid relatively little attention to: that vista of delight which, half a century ago, E. K. Rand saw in a commentary on Ovid's *Amores.*[1] Most scholarship on medieval literary theory and criticism has dealt with other matters—narrative structure, rhetorical influence, and, perhaps most extensively, allegory and typology. In Horatian terms, it has concentrated on profit rather than pleasure, and the notion that people in the Middle Ages always read and wrote allegorically is perhaps even more widely disseminated now than in Rand's generation. Scholars have applied medieval literary ideas to medieval poetry in many cases, but not usually to all that nondidactic, principally entertaining material we know existed: Goliardic verse, the fabliaux, trivial court lyrics, even some work by Chaucer and Boccaccio. Yet there are medieval explanations and justifications of the value

[1] "The Classics in the Thirteenth Century," *Speculum,* 4 (1929), 252.

of literary pleasure, whether conjoined with profit or not. They are the subject of this book.

Although my focus throughout is on literary thought, I have always tried to see that thought in its social and intellectual context. This perspective has led to fairly extended treatment of some nonliterary matters, such as the medieval idea of emotional health, the secular implications of fourteenth-century hunting manuals, and psychological responses to the Black Death. I hope that these interdisciplinary forays, however limited or inadequate in themselves, will help to place the literary ideas in one of their most important contexts, the increasingly substantial but not fully autonomous secular culture of the later Middle Ages. Although my approach is historical, some of the medieval ideas I treat have modern resonance, and we will see that much of the justification of entertainment in the Middle Ages has affinities with recent holistic approaches to health and well-being.

The first three chapters deal with theory. Chapter 1 surveys the medieval recognition that some literature pleases as well as, or rather than, profits. The next two discuss ideas in the later Middle Ages which justify the offering of pleasure. Chapter 2 presents an essentially medical tradition that regards the emotional response of pleasure, elicited from sources including literature, as physically and mentally healthful. It discusses a few examples of criticism predicated on the hygienic value of entertainment, notably the concept of theatrics in Hugh of St. Victor and later thinkers. Chapter 3 presents a more psychological and ethical approach that views the taking of entertainment as recreation, a necessary part of our lives. The remaining three chapters deal with literature and literary criticism that invoke, in one way or another, these theoretical arguments. Chapter 4 treats a variety of works and genres that claim to recreate or reinvigorate. Chapter 5 discusses a structural pattern central to the *Decameron* and a few other compositions, the movement from plague to pleasure; it returns to medical texts, specifically the plague tracts, to make its point about the therapeutic implications of the pattern. Chapter 6 continues with further analysis of the *Decameron,* the culminating work of medieval literary recreation, and of some early critical opinion about it.

It may be helpful to make clear at the start some of the things

this book will not treat. It is not an attempt to prove that people in the Middle Ages enjoyed themselves, or to produce a full inventory of the medieval literature and performance that seem principally for entertainment. I assume, rather than rehearse, the copious documentation concerning entertainment and entertainers by such scholars as E. K. Chambers, Edmond Faral, and Helen Waddell;[2] and when I turn to such texts, some of them well known, for evidence, it is for the sake of literary theory rather than social history. Nor do I discuss the subjects of comedy, humor, or laughter; they are often involved in that literature which pleases rather than profits, but the theories I consider do not usually explore them in much detail. Finally, though I believe (and will state more than once in the course of this book) that the attitudes toward literary delight treated here are relevant to literature that seeks to profit as well as please, I have tended to avoid discussing instances where pleasure appears as part of a work meant primarily for instruction. Much of the material in Ernst Robert Curtius's famous excursus "Jest and Earnest in Medieval Literature" is of this sort (though some, including that in his tenth excursus, is concerned more purely with jest);[3] and there are many studies that deal with theories and texts involving the combination of the humorous and the serious—it is almost impossible to avoid wrestling with the pleasure-profit question when considering such subjects as the *Libro de buen amor,* the cycle drama, and the *Canterbury Tales.* Though I do discuss the latter briefly in Chapter 4, I have tried to confine myself to cases in which the recreational and medical arguments dominate rather than merely accompany.

Although I think this book breaks new ground, it is certainly not the first to notice the idea of recreation as a literary defense nor to suggest the medical values of entertainment. Some earlier criticism alluded to these ideas more or less in passing. Of the more extended work, Joachim Suchomski's *"Delectatio" und "Utilitas"* is a thorough investigation of Christian attitudes to-

[2]Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage,* 2 vols. (1903; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1967). Faral, *Les jongleurs en France au Moyen Age* (1910; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1970). Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars,* 6th ed. (rpt. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955).

[3]*European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages,* trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 417–35, 478–79.

ward literary entertainment from the Bible through Aquinas, which the author then applies to Latin and German literature, principally the twelfth-century Latin comedies.[4] Though I duplicate some of his theoretical evidence in Chapters 1 and 3, my focus is generally on the later Middle Ages, beginning rather than ending with Aquinas, and my literary examples are almost entirely different, drawing on vernacular works in French, English, and Italian. Three recent full-length studies also consider in part the medical ideas of solace and therapy, principally in Renaissance texts, material that parallels in varying degrees my independent investigations of these theories in the later Middle Ages.[5] And I have found stimulating a chapter in Thomas Reed's dissertation, which attempts to delineate some nondidactic aesthetic ideas that he finds relevant to certain medieval debate poems.[6]

I am aware of the ironies inherent in a scholarly study, fully documented, on the subject of entertainment and recreation. At times it is like trying to explain a joke. But if the history of medieval literary thought is to be complete, it will have to acknowledge not just that light verse and amusing stories existed but that people in the Middle Ages had coherent ideas about the acceptability and value of that kind of discourse. This book is an exploratory step in defining some of those ideas, especially as they attained greater prominence in the later Middle Ages than they had enjoyed before, as a part of the many changes in medieval culture from the twelfth century on. It is too large a task here to relate the theories to every aspect of that culture and the literature they illuminate; my principal

[4]*"Delectatio" und "Utilitas": Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis mittelalterlicher komischer Literatur* (Bern: Franke, 1975). For additional work on aspects of the recreational idea in some medieval German literature, an area with which I am unfamiliar, see William C. McDonald, "Die Deutung von Hartmanns Wendung *swaere stunde senfter machen:* Befreiung von 'Betrubnis' oder 'Langeweile'?" *Studia Neophilologica,* 46 (1974), 281–94.

[5]Glenda Pritchett, "Humor and the Comic in Middle Scots Poetry: A Study of the 'Ballettis Mirry' of the Bannatyne MS" (Diss. University of Chicago, 1979), pp. 62–97. Robert J. Clements and Joseph Gibaldi, *Anatomy of the Novella: The European Tale Collection from Boccaccio and Chaucer to Cervantes* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), pp. 8–12, 36–51. Heinz-Günter Schmitz, *Physiologie des Scherzes: Bedeutung und Rechtfertigung der Ars Iocandi im 16. Jahrhundert* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1972), pp. 91–183.

[6]"Middle English Debate Poetry: A Study in Form and Function" (Diss. University of Virginia, 1978).

concern is simply to explicate the theories and show where literary texts rely on them, not to offer full analyses of those texts and their values. I hope essentially to redress an imbalance in modern scholarship that fosters, intentionally or not, the notion that medieval literary thought had nothing but indifference to or contempt for the purely pleasurable. To do that may help enlarge our appreciation of the breadth and tolerance of the understanding of literature in the Middle Ages.

Throughout the book, in quotations from manuscripts and early printed editions, I have silently expanded abbreviations and modernized punctuation. Translations whose source is not specified are my own. In the absence of a bibliography, the Index of Sources will lead readers to the first and full citation of references subsequently abbreviated.

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