Conclusion
Nonreading in late-medieval England

Through emendation, nonlinear apprehension, materiality, and temporality, late-medieval readers in England enjoyed access to a diverse number of reading practices that invited and positioned their participation as central to the making of meaning. Suffusing these practices, medieval understandings of the body, of architecture, of mobility, and of space indicate a recognition of reading as an intellectual activity intensely physical, embodied in its practice. The materiality not only of the textual medium itself, but also of readers and the spaces they inhabited while reading, impacted reading experiences in profound ways.

In explicitly inviting, modelling, or discouraging such practices, writers considered what it meant to be a reader even as their understanding of what it meant to be a writer underwent change influenced by altering notions of their own authority and, eventually, the printing press. They determined that readers could indeed participate in the creation of meaning, and guided their audiences towards the types of reading practices that did not require formal university education or universal literacy. To the writers who elicited and modelled interactive, participatory reading practice, reading and writing were not only viewed as complementary activities; they were also activities that could involve the same work, the same practices, although different in scale. Both writers and readers engaged in emendation; writers relied on nonlinear reading to construct the structure of their works; they inserted themselves into the narratives they composed even as they invited readers' own participatory contributions. To be a reader in England of the late fourteenth to early sixteenth centuries was to be understood as acting like a writer.

In this context, it can be useful to Hoccleve's friend who, as discussed in the Introduction, prompts the addition of a moral to Hoccleve's translation of 'Jereslaus' Wife'. The friend can be

situated firmly within the category of participatory reader, even as he contributed in a writerly way the moral to Hoccleve's poem. His participation with Hoccleve's texts involved interactions that shaped the final form of the work, and even motivated an addition to the work – but did not demonstrate the authority that had begun to characterize the identity of the writer. His additions were presented to Hoccleve, suggested to him, and accepted or rejected by Hoccleve as author. Hoccleve's *Dialogue* offers a compelling portrait of a participatory reader. Hoccleve shares an interest in such with many other writers of the time. In the words of Thomas Usk, who, writing in the late fourteenth century, exclaimed that he desired not simply a good reader, but 'coveite[d] and pray[ed for] a good book-amender, in correccion of wordes and sentence',[1] the participatory reader could offer much that writers viewed as beneficial. Nevertheless, that particularly desirable type of reader necessitated training and accommodation in order to engage most productively with the writer's work. This training could start with activities as straightforward as assessing the metre of a line to judge whether any words might have been altered and, in their alteration, complicate the metre. Such readers needed both the encouragement to recognize themselves as capable of contributing to texts in transmission and interpretation, and the training that could make those contributions most effective. Writers, including Usk, Lydgate, Caxton, Hull, Skelton, and others, turned to participatory reading practices to facilitate the encouragement of this thoughtful, contributory reader.

Participation thus develops through discourse and reading practices as a fundamental aspect of the work of ideal readers, whom writers sought to encourage, train, and constrain. Readers could participate through how they negotiated texts; how they responded to them physically, intellectually, and emotionally; how they identified with a narrative or a character; how they related to the text's material qualities or its material surroundings; and how they related to them temporally. Further forms of participatory reading, such as question poems and other ludic works, and immersion such as that promoted in medieval devotional reading and experienced today when playing most video games, could also invite participation.[2] Participatory practices, accordingly, fostered a literary culture of exchange and community. By emphasizing participatory reading strategies, writers encouraged readers, or subsets of their readers, to practice or enact particular responses. Such writers' interest in and reliance upon readers' participation cannot be

understated in its consequences: The elicitation of readers' participation represents the work of readers as mattering. Participatory readers mattered because their work made a difference – to the text, to its interpretation, and even, sometimes, to the writer.

That readers' work mattered points to a significant change from the older discourse of the 'learned' and the 'lewid', the Latinate, literate, highly educated writers confronted by readers characterized by their ignorance of Latin, which ignorance betokened their scant claims to literacy. In the culture of the learned and the lewid, readers were perceived as scarcely able to participate with writers, let alone contribute in ways that mattered. This change, from that of the lewid vernacular reader whose contributions engendered little consideration, anticipation, or accommodation, to the participatory vernacular reader, speaks to how writers perceived the possibilities of their growing vernacular audience whose literacy practices were at the same time increasing in sophistication. As Katharine Breen has argued, writers from the twelfth century onwards sought to shape lay readership.[3] Writers focused on how to inculcate amongst this audience ethical self-ordering, a project Breen sees as demonstrated most spectacularly in *Piers Plowman*. Yet the inculcation of a self-regulating framework did not suffice to address all the needs that, by the fifteenth century, writers viewed readers as facing. Nor did it address how writers began to see readers as offering valuable work complementary to their own. In consequence, participation emerges to flourish in discourse and practice. Focusing on participation thus underscores a concept of readers and reading in late-medieval England that treats readers as partners in the making of meaning. Recognizing readers as participatory partners thus enriches the portrait of late-medieval literary culture with which we engage. Even as it has become a given that late-medieval writers explored notions of authorship and authority that move them closer to the modern (and Romanticized) notion of the author as the sole creative force for a work, exploring participatory reading acts as a counter, for participatory reading practices demonstrate a collaborative model of meaning-making in which both writers and readers contribute to the creation and interpretation of literary works.

Nevertheless, not all writers viewed readers as able to respond with such positive contributions, or viewed readers as useful or desirable for their potential to provide such. Chaucer – who restricts encouragement of his texts' emendation to a closed audience, who elsewhere seems particularly fixed on enlarging the

authority of the writer – offers intriguing counter-portraits of a different type of reader and a different type of reading. His portraits, illustrated in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale, is that of the nonreader. Considering nonreading alongside the reading practices previously discussed shows how late-medieval attempts to shape reading represent, in some ways, repeated attempts to avoid flirting with futility. No matter what writers recommended to readers, and no matter how strenuously they sought to safeguard against undesirable reading practices, readers could nevertheless choose to act on the very agency that many writers desired to harness to their own ends. Readers could even read by choosing not to.

Addressing what readers might do and how they might relate to texts, the book historian Leah Price asks, what 'would it mean to study books without privileging reading?' For Price, one way to answer this question lies in considering what she calls the 'nonreading' work of books. Considering 'nonreading' is to examine not only reading, but how books were handled (in which something is done to the book) and circulated (in which something is done to other persons by means of the book).[4] Price's concept of nonreading adds another angle to studying the history of the book and reading. The concept of nonreading also invites analysis that attends to the arguments of object-oriented ontology and new materialisms. As studying nonreading involves attending to the material nature of books, moments of nonreading demonstrate how the book as matter performs its own reading and its own narratives even as it interacts with humans and nonhumans alike, affecting their reading of and participation with a text.

In this context, two moments of participation figured around textual objects in Chaucer's works call for particular attention. As one of the examples focuses on a letter rather than the book, expanding Price's focus from the book to textual objects considered more broadly not only encompasses the examples discussed below, but also emphasizes how often reading experiences in medieval culture can be identified outside the covers of manuscripts through other engagements with textuality, from wall texts and subtleties to documents.

The first example of nonreading to consider comes from *Troilus and Criseyde*. Pandarus and Troilus have begun to collaborate in their efforts to persuade Criseyde to acknowledge and respond to Troilus's professed love for her, although Criseyde proves hesitant. Abandoned by her father who has left Troy to join the

Greeks encamped outside its walls, Criseyde lives isolated from the nominal power structures of the city even as she also enjoys a degree of independence. The moment of nonreading develops when Pandarus passes the first letter from Troilus to Criseyde in Book II. In Price's terms, this moment falls into the category of nonreading circulation, in which the text object acts on a person. The events leading up to the letter exchange are also significant for our understanding the letter's eventual nonreading moment. Pandarus has previously informed Criseyde of Troilus's love for her and encouraged her to love him in return. He has also coached Troilus in his letter-writing skills, instructing him to beblot the letter with his tears. Troilus, having followed these instructions, kisses the letter. At that moment he acknowledges the letter as an agential object, saying, 'Lettre, a blisful destine / The shapyn is'.[5] That is, Troilus views the letter as possessing the ability and power to enact change in Troilus's destiny.

The letter's moment of nonreading occurs when Pandarus conveys the letter to Criseyde. It is at this point when he hands it over that the situation becomes a little strained: as Chaucer writes, Pandarus meets with Criseyde in a garden with other people about, and there he, 'hente hire faste, / And in hire bosom the lettre down he thraste' (II.1154–5). He seizes Criseyde and thrusts the letter down the front of her dress. The language here is striking in its connotations – through 'hente' and 'thraste' – of violence. What this moment of nonreading demonstrates is how the letter acts as a textual object that does not simply stand in for or communicate Troilus's desire to form a relationship with Criseyde. Instead, it disquietingly exceeds that meaning through the language of seizure, assault, and injury that echoes through the letter's movement. Facilitated by Pandarus, the letter here asserts a violent, sexualized authority over Criseyde's body, acting not only as a communicative object and love-token, but as assailant. This work of the letter thus queers Criseyde's body as the two intermingle, destabilizing Criseyde's bodily privacy and independence. In this way, analysing the work of nonreading in this scene shows how the letter compromises Criseyde's bodily autonomy, thus undermining her earlier claim that 'I am myn owene womman' (II.750). This loss of autonomy elicits Criseyde's compliance to the demand of Pandarus that she read and respond to the letter. It represents a loss of autonomy further emphasized and extended by later events in the poem. It also represents reading gone awry, in which the rejection of reading proves as problematic as reading could also

be. Consequently, nonreading demonstrates the dangerous possibilities of participation. Both reading and nonreading can provoke destabilization, suggesting that engaging with texts cannot always be relied upon as a benefit to readers.

The second example of nonreading comes from the Wife of Bath's prologue: that moment in which Alison, realizing that her fifth husband, Jankyn, will never cease to read to her from his book of wicked wives. She grabs the manuscript and, as she explains, 'Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght / Out of his book' (790–1). She abruptly wrenches three pages from Jankyn's anti-feminist anthology. This moment of nonreading not only represents what Tom Shippey has referred to as an example of bibliophobia, but further distinguishes additional perspectives regarding human relationships to books.[6] In ripping apart the book, Alison uses it as an object whose state speaks to and fuels her disagreement with her husband. Strained and disrupted, the book's material state represents the emotional and intellectual state of their marriage. In addition, reframing this moment of nonreading to examine it not from a human perspective, but from the perspective of the book, shows how the book has become a victim of their marital disputes: in effect, readers witness the victimization of the book. The blame for disturbing misogyny falls upon it first, and Alison responds to harm and silence it. This example of nonreading also demonstrates how nonreading functions as an act of resistance to instruction. How writers – and even other readers – wish readers to participate may not necessarily suit the interests or welfare of those readers. Nonreading provides a participatory counter-practice to participatory reading. In the practice of nonreading, the reader exerts independent agency to oppose and even defend herself against the imposition of others' agendas.

Furthermore, the body of the book acts as a surrogate for and prologue to the violence Alison immediately perpetrates upon Jankyn's body: just after she rips out the pages, she explains that she, 'with my fest so took hym on the cheke / That in oure fyr he fil bakward adoun' (792–3). Violence to the book's body prefigures violence to Jankyn's body. In its surrogate representation of violence, and in the way that the book engenders Alison's violent response, the book in a moment of nonreading also becomes weaponized. From it springs forth further violence. Both Troilus's letter and Jankyn's book demonstrate how textual objects can function not as objects of reading, but through the hands of nonreaders as agents of victimization, ones that threaten the integrity

of Criseyde's and Jankyn's bodies. Nonreading demonstrates how it, too, can be an embodied practice. Even as reading can evoke and require the embodied participation of readers, nonreading can reflect on the embodied possibilities of texts themselves in their material forms. The work of reading, in its nonreading practice, is thus not restricted to the cognitive, intellectual realm alone. Perhaps most importantly, Chaucer's depictions of nonreading remind audiences of writers and readers in the Middle Ages and today that, as much as medieval writers might have desired to prompt particular types of reading practice, they had to recognize the effects of the agency of readers that they sought to utilize for their own ends: possessed of independent agency, readers could always disregard whatever guidance writers sought to offer them in order to read and use texts for their own ends.

Included in the category of nonreading practice is a host of other acts. In particular, readers who wrote their names in their books mark moments of nonreading. Nonreading is also marked by doodles drawn by readers in the margins and flyleaves. Many such examples of nonreading can be seen in the margins of University of Chicago MS 564, a copy of the *Canterbury Tales*. It is liberally adorned with the names of several owners, primarily from the sixteenth century. Such inscriptions of identity have been adduced both as evidence of ownership, and also as evidence of particular attachment to the text.[7] However, in the act of inscribing a name, the person writing it does not read, but is involved in an act of nonreading. The signature thus displays a conspicuous moment in which the writer did not pay attention to the text.

Doodles can operate similarly. In the margin of MS 564, f. 37r, someone penned a doodle of an inquisitive, bearded face. Above it has been written, perhaps by the same person, 'Ryght worshepfull', as if testing a possible letter salutation. Margins of manuscripts were often favoured for this purpose. In Oxford, Bodleian MS Selden supra 53, a collection of Hoccleve's poems and Lydgate's *Danse macabre*, the figure of a happy man, waving, has been drawn in dry point opposite a stanza from Hoccleve's 'Complaint' on f. 78r, and numerous other skeletal faces in dry point appear on folios 54r, 73r, and 97r.[8] In a mid-fifteenth-century copy of Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, a reader turned the manuscript sideways to explore a possible letter salutation in its left margin, 'to ^ my moste very frynde in Rygarde and to' on f. 22v, and later, on f. 45r, partway through a description of the rule of the Israelite king Rehoboam, a reader has added in the bottom margin 'forget nott' above a set

of entwined initials, which treats the book as a long-lasting monument recording what was presumably an affectionate relationship.[9] Although it is possible that a person, searching for a writing surface, simply picked the manuscript up, turned to a random page, and penned their name, initials, or a drawing, it seems more likely that examples like these readers' marks emerge in moments when the manuscript initially had been employed for reading. Readers read with dry point or pen in hand, or pen and ink nearby, perhaps intending annotation. Instead, they elected to do something other than attend to the text. Perhaps distracted, perhaps thinking of other matters, perhaps even bored, a reader stopped reading. Yet this reader continued to use the book. However, the reader's use of it reflects a purpose other than reading. Such signatures, doodles, and marginalia ostentatiously mark moments when readers exerted their agency to escape the guidance of writers and instead pursue their own interests, leaving behind their own nonreading commentary.

In the hands of those nonreaders writing their names, texts were not in that moment of inscription sources of instruction. Instead, the object of the text provided a material vehicle for memory and identity. In the hands of doodlers, margins and flyleaves become spaces for play. Additionally, these moments of nonreading indicate how easily readers could turn their pens to other ends, how easily they could move between the role of ephemeral reader and the role – however mildly expressed – of contributor. In this role, they provided something to be read by later audiences, something that would compete with an author's words, even Chaucer's words, for the attention of subsequent readers. Acts of reading could also prompt resistant marginal commentary, as when John Shirley comments on Lydgate's misogyny in the *Mumming at Windsor* to exclaim, 'A daun Iohan, est y vray?', and the scribe of Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* in Harley 2251 disgruntledly addresses Lydgate in the margins, 'Be pees I bidde yow', 'Ye wil be shent', 'Ye haue no cause to say so', 'Ye gete yow to thank', and 'Be pees or I wil rende this leef out of your book', and then comments on the reactions of future readers when adding, 'There is no good woman that wil be wroth ne take no quarrel agenst this booke as I suppose'.[10] The book whose materiality is so necessary for corrective reading, whose organization prompts emotional and intellectual responses to the tales, whose temporalities elicit readers to situate themselves in particular historical or fictive moments, becomes also a space for readers to assert themselves, their individuality, and their

responses. Such moments of nonreading and resistant reading marked by marginal commentary further contribute to readers' avenues for self-assertion and resistance. Such responses demonstrate the degree to which writers' attempts to guide and influence readers could represent flirtations with futility.

These responses additionally highlight how much more strictly controlled the seeming liberatory digital media of today can be. A reader of a web page can only click on links provided, or abandon it altogether. They can only alter the text of pages, or leave comments or notes behind, when those pages provide an interface specially designed to accept, record, and publish such remarks. In other words, the materiality of the manuscript and print book enabled responses from readers to be noted regardless of writers', scribes', or printers' plans, whereas it takes specialized design or add-on applications to enable readers to comment similarly on digital material, making the affordance of such participation part of or absent from a digital work's planned design. Yet both medieval writers and readers and those of today's digital media engage in exploring ways to relate to each other across the divide of time and space and community occasioned by the dissemination of texts to and beyond the writer's initial audience. Finally, examining these long histories of the book, and the long histories of reading embedded within books and related textual media, demonstrates how complex and easily overlooked can be the practice of reading itself. In the academy today, reluctance and hesitance often emerge around the subject of critical reading as questions about its nature and function continue to arise: What is critical? What does it entail? What does it privilege, and what does it obscure? What are its benefits? While exploring ways of answering these questions, it can be useful to keep in mind that these questions have been asked for hundreds of years, in periods that witnessed greater challenges facing literary reading, and literary culture, than those we confront today. Not too many years ago, the National Educational Association in a series of studies first concluded that 'Reading [was] at Risk', then discovered that 'Reading [was] on the Rise', a determination that was subsequently determined to represent a 'New Chapter in American Literacy'.[11] This arc, from the disappearance of reading to the realization that it had not failed nor disappeared, but simply been practised in application to unfamiliar media, in unfamiliar places, and in unexpected ways, is one worth remembering when evaluating reading not simply today alone, but also in the late Middle Ages.

Notes

1 Thomas Usk, *The testament of love*. Ed. Gary W. Shawver (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), at III.9.146–51.

2 See, for example, Kimberly Bell's essay, '"Rounes to rede": ludic reading games in the alliterative wheel of fortune poem *Somer Sonenday*', in *Games and gaming in medieval literature*, ed. Serina Patterson (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 169–86. Bell usefully summarizes key contributors to the discussion on literary games in offering a definition of literary games as 'played by willing participants (the reading and listening audience members) who engage in a contest with the author (a game of interpretation) to achieve a certain outcome (discovering the message of the poem)' (174). Although the study of literary games exceeds the scope of this project, it is worth emphasizing that the literary game depends centrally upon readers' participation. A literary game without a participating reader is incomplete, existing as a game only in potential. As with the forms of participation discussed here, to achieve a successful game requires readers to be guided towards particular actions or interpretations. Thus literary games also give rise to dependency on readers' agency that is in some way controlled or limited. For another approach to literary games that bridges the digital–literary divide, see Anastasia Salter, *What is your quest? From adventure games to interactive books* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014) and Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as virtual reality: immersion and interactivity in literature and electronic media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). As Betsy McCormick puts it in the 'Afterword: medieval ludens' to *Games and gaming*, ludic work – whether that of the video games, or a medieval game of chess – 'both affect[s] and reveal[s] culture' (215). As I have argued above and throughout, participatory work such as the reading practices assessed herein also affect and reveal culture. On immersion as participation, see Ryan above and also Alison McMahan, 'Immersion, engagement, and presence: a method for analyzing 3-D video games', in *The video game theory reader*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 67–86.

3 Breen, *Imagining an English reading public, 1150–1400*.

4 Price, *How to do things with books in Victorian Britain*, 5.

5 *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Benson, II.1091–2. All quotations from Chaucer that follow are drawn from this edition.

6 Tom Shippey, 'Bibliophobia: hatred of the book in the Middle Ages'. *The Matthews memorial lectures for 1999*. London: Birkbeck College, forthcoming, and available online at www.bbk.ac.uk/english/about-us/bibliophobia-hatred-of-the-book-in-the-middle-ages.

7 See, for example, the discussions in Robert Babock *et al.*, *A book of her own: an exhibition of manuscripts and printed books in the Yale*

University Library that were owned by women before 1700 (New Haven: Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, 2005).

8 My thanks to Elon Lang, in whose dissertation *Hoccleve and the poetics of reading* (diss., Washington University in St. Louis. 2010), 146, I first learned about this manuscript in time to arrange my own viewing of it.

9 Chicago, Newberry Library Case MS 33.3.

10 Eleanor Prescott Hammond, 'A reproof to Lydgate', in *Modern language notes* 26:3 (1911), 74–6, at 75.

11 These quotations are taken from the title of NEA publications about their reading surveys, available online at www.neabigread.org/publications.php.