



Medieval Autographies: The "I" of the Text (The Conway Lectures in Medieval Studies)

A. C. Spearing

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In *Medieval Autographies*, A. C. Spearing develops a new engagement of narrative theory with medieval English first-person writing, focusing on the roles and functions of the "I" as a shifting textual phenomenon, not to be defined either as autobiographical or as the label of a fictional speaker or narrator. Spearing identifies and explores a previously unrecognized category of medieval English poetry, calling it "autography." He describes this form as emerging in the mid-fourteenth century and consisting of extended nonlyrical writings in the first person, embracing prologues, authorial interventions in and commentaries on third-person narratives, and descendants of the *dit*, a genre of French medieval poetry. He argues that autography arose as a means of liberation from the requirement to tell stories with preordained conclusions and as a way of achieving a closer relation to lived experience, with all its unpredictability and inconsistencies. Autographies, he claims, are marked by a cluster of characteristics including a correspondence to the texture of life as it is experienced, a montage-like unpredictability of structure, and a concern with writing and textuality. Beginning with what may be the earliest extended first-person narrative in Middle English, *Winner and Waster*, the book examines instances of the *dit* as discussed by French scholars, analyzes Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* as a textual performance, and devotes separate chapters to detailed readings of Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes* prologue, his *Complaint and Dialogue*, and the witty first-person elements in Osbern Bokenham's legends of saints. An afterword suggests possible further applications of the concept of autography, including discussion of the intermittent autographic commentaries on the narrative in *Troilus and Criseyde* and Capgrave's *Life of Saint Katherine*.

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