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Vernacular literacy in late-medieval England: the example of East Anglian medical manuscripts

Jones, M. Claire (2000) *Vernacular literacy in late-medieval England: the example of East Anglian medical manuscripts*. PhD thesis, University of Glasgow.

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Abstract

This thesis is an examination of vernacular literacy in late-medieval East Anglia, using the evidence supplied by English medical texts datable to between 1350-1500. It addresses not only the text

but also the manuscripts in which they survive and the people who wrote, owned and read them. This means I have been able to examine the literacy of a group of readers in a specific region. This thesis is divided into three main parts. The first describes the approach taken, and critically assesses the field of historical literacy before examining the value to the study of modern theories of literacy. It includes an overview of late-medieval medical practice in order to place the manuscripts in their immediate context. The second section consists of a detailed examination of the primary materials and presents a corpus of some thirty-seven manuscripts dating from the mid-fourteenth to the late fifteenth centuries. Each manuscript is described in terms of its physical appearance and the type of texts it contains. Provenance information is supplied for owners and readers in the Middle Ages. The third section draws together these findings in the light of the literacy theories adopted, analysing the information in terms of the types of text included (both medical and non-medical), types of book (whether basic or luxurious productions), and the types of owner (graduate physicians, rural practitioners or interested laypeople). My conclusion shows that the vernacular medical literature from late-medieval East Anglia provides a picture of literacy that is more complex than previously suggested. Several shifts in literacy practices for groups and individuals can be discerned from the evidence of this survey. The increase in production and use of vernacular texts cannot be simply described as a broadening of literacy and increased accessibility of texts. Rather than a growth of literacy per se, the vernacularisation of medicine in late-medieval East Anglia seems to have been both the cause and effect of shifts in literacy practices. The increased use of written texts in medicine during this period can be shown to be a process that involves participation in literacy events, broadening of background knowledge and the acquisition and development of practical skills in reading and writing.

Item Type:	Thesis (PhD)
Qualification Level:	Doctoral
Subjects:	P Language and Literature > PE English
Colleges/Schools:	College of Arts > School of Critical Studies > English Language and Linguistics
Funder's Name:	UNSPECIFIED
Supervisor's Name:	Lowe, Dr. Kathryn A.
Date of Award:	2000
Depositing User:	Miss Fiona Riggans
Unique ID:	glathesis:2000-633
Copyright:	Copyright of this thesis is held by the author.
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Last Modified:	10 Dec 2012 13:20

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