

INTRODUCTION

Understanding Premodern Media

An image from a later medieval English manuscript represents the transfer of knowledge as a multimedia event. Introducing Honorius of Autun's *Imago Mundi*, here mistakenly attributed to the Venerable Bede, the image accompanies an encyclopedia of natural history (Fig. 1).¹ But instead of depicting the object of study, the illustrator represents a process of communication. Three students, smaller figures in the lower center of the image, converse as they hold their books. Their pointing hands indicate not the texts on their laps but each other. In medieval manuscripts, manicules typically appear in the margins to redirect the reader's attention to the text.² But here they seem to have a different effect, suggesting that the students' colloquy is as central to their learning as the written word. Flanking these students are the twin authorities of the putative author Bede, whose banderole reads, "Quod didici refferam mercedem non michi queram" (I will relate [to you] what I learned; I do not seek a reward for myself) and their instructor, whose banderole reads, "Beda michi vago mundi monstretur ymago" (The unstable image of the world was shown to me by Bede). The banderoles, which typically indicate speech, suggest that the media of speech and embodied presence intersect with the medium of the book, as they curl around and in one place partially obscure the written media on the shelf. The image's color palette, too, unites the red and black of the books in the image and the text on the manuscript page with some of the clothing of the figures: Bede's collar and hat, the rightmost student's cloak, and the instructor's hose and boots echo the colors of the written text. Even as the words of these figures emphasize Bede's authority over the apocryphal text, the books in the image are only one kind of medium for receiving it. Bede's manicule points not to his banderole or to the books, but to the students themselves, implying a networked communication of knowledge comprising author, book, and reception practices. Meanwhile, the



Figure 1. Illumination introducing Honorius of Autun's *Imago Mundi*, here mistakenly attributed to Bede (England, fourteenth century). Formerly London, Schøyen Collection MS 33, f. 120v (detail); now privately held. Photo: © Les Enluminures.

instructor's manicule points to his own banderole, which, while referring to Bede, positions him as another mediator of the author's knowledge.

This manuscript was created in England between 1325 and 1430. Likely for royal use, it contains several chronicles, including excerpts from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, and thirteen portraits of English kings.³ But this image has less to do with royal lineage than with learning and transmission. Its geometry is a familiar one in a different iconographic context. The smaller students positioned below the larger figures recall the patron portraits in medieval images of Christ, Mary, or the saints. One striking example of this convention appears in Lorenzo Monaco's "Intercession of Christ and the Virgin" (Fig. 2). In this image, a group of small-scale penitents clusters between large figures of Christ and the Virgin. Pointing to the wound in his



Figure 2. Lorenzo Monaco, *The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin* (before 1402). Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.

side, Christ says, “My Father, let those be saved for whom you wished me to suffer the Passion.” Holding out her breast, Mary says, “Dearest son, because of the milk that I gave you, have mercy on them.” At the top of the image, God the Father sends the dove of the Holy Spirit toward Christ in a symbol of divine grace. This image, too, depicts mediation, albeit in a very different context. It is commonly considered under the rubric of “intercession,” a term that emphasizes the intervention of Christ and Mary on behalf of sinners.⁴ But its geometry also engages the theme of Christ as the mediator of salvation, which is to say, the communicative middle term between earth and heaven. This tradition goes back to the Pauline epistles and gains new energy in the later Middle Ages, when several other holy figures—Mary, the saints, and even professional religious figures—also gain the status of mediators.⁵ In this image, as in many medieval prayers and texts concerned with intercession, the exceptional bodies of Christ and Mary are the material media through which sinful people are saved. In both word and image here, Mary’s breast and Christ’s wound are media of salvation. The dove, also, comes visually between Christ and God the Father, using the natural medium of air to communicate heavenly grace. Even as the viewer is awed by the sheer beauty of the image, and by the monumental larger-than-life figures of God, Jesus, and Mary, the viewer identifies herself with the small penitents. Thus, as the viewer experiences grace through the medium of the painting, her body identifies with the state of betweenness that mediation expresses.⁶ Salvation, this painting suggests, is a multimedia event, with bodies, environments, and the painting itself all included in its media ecology.

My analysis of these two medieval images has intentionally used the language of modern media studies. The discipline has developed an extensive conceptual framework to describe cultural phenomena emerging from the development of modern technologies of mass communication that we conventionally call “media,” from the printing press to the internet, with the power to bring content to ever-growing audiences. Given these modern contexts, the language of media theory might seem ill-suited to medieval aesthetic objects and cultural practices. Lacking technologies of mechanical reproduction, medieval art and literature are generally thought to be unique, artisanal, and highly localized, giving them what Walter Benjamin famously described as an “aura.”⁷ As such, they seem alien to the colloquial sense of media as “mass media”; that is, as mechanisms of communication that can at once reach a large, dispersed audience instantaneously and also shape the content transmitted to that audience. But as these two images show, an idea

of being in-between recurs throughout the later Middle Ages as an ontology. Anna Kornbluh summarizes the aesthetic and cultural conjunction of the concept of mediation: “In the eminent tradition of aesthetic theory, ‘mediation’ means *the active process of relating*—making sense and making meaning by inlaying into medium; making middles that merge extremes; making available in language and image and rhythm the supervalent abstractions otherwise unavailable to our sensuous perception—like ‘justice’ or ‘value.’”⁸ In this sense, medieval people perceived their lives as mediate, between this world and the next, heaven and earth, animals and God, ruler and ruled. Even as certain rigid hierarchies in ecclesiastical and political power structures marked the culture of the Middle Ages, these hierarchies ultimately created an interdependence among their subjects. The animal and natural worlds, too, were mediascapes in which people came to understand themselves and the divine cosmology through a richly textured fabric of interconnections. Animals figured as avatars; rocks posed ontological cruxes.⁹ These cultural phenomena led to identifying certain material entities as mediators between message and audience; that is, they led to a premodern understanding of media.

These contexts shed new light on two passages from the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, in which the fourteenth-century poet limns a medieval multimedia ecology by joining literature to other kinds of information that circulated through distributed pathways of transmission. The first is Dido’s lament over Aeneas’s betrayal in the *House of Fame*.

O wel-away that I was born!	<i>alas</i>
For thorgh yow [Aeneas] is my name lorn	<i>lost</i>
And alle myn actes red and songe	<i>read</i>
Over al thys lond, on every tonge.	
O wikke Fame!—for ther nys	
Nothing so swift, lo, as she is!	

(HF 345–50)¹⁰

An adaptation of a passage from Ovid’s *Heroides*, Dido’s soliloquy emphasizes her concern for her reputation. In particular, her fears coalesce around the multimodal transmission of her infamy: through Aeneas’s supercession of her narrative (“thorgh yow [Aeneas] is my name lorn”); through the repetition of her story in oral and textual modalities (“And alle myn actes red and songe / Over al thys lond, on every tonge”); and through the personified Fame’s dissemination of her actions. The prepositions “thorgh” and “over”

locate her story within a media ecology, where its mutability seems antithetical to the concept of *auctoritas* that imagines a linear and lineal model of textual transmission.¹¹ And yet, the entire soliloquy is bracketed by conventional (if contradictory) assertions of authority: Chaucer's narrator's avowal of sole authorship at the outset, "Non other auctour alegge I" (*HF* 314), and the reference to his sources at the end of the passage: "Rede Virgile in Eneydos / Or the Epistle of Ovyde" (*HF* 378–79). The passage thereby poses a question: how did Chaucer understand the transmission of his work, and how did he express that understanding as part of his poetic project?

While several scholars, whose work I will discuss in greater detail, have addressed this question, we can see Chaucer's continued interest in the topic by putting this passage from the *House of Fame* in dialogue with one from the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*: the narrator's well-known apology.

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,	<i>Whoever</i>
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan	<i>repeat; closely</i>
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,	<i>Each</i>
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,	<i>Although; coarsely; indiscreetly</i>
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,	<i>falsely</i>
Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.	<i>make up</i>

(1.731–36)

Critics tend to read this passage as a meditation on narrative transparency and immediacy; to understand it, in the words of Steven Justice, as the narrator's "apology for his verbatim reportage and short wit" that "delay[s]" the resumption of narrative after the conclusion of the pilgrim portraits.¹² And yet, the odd thing about this passage is that it occurs *before* Harry Bailly proposes the tale-telling contest in 1.791–801. That is to say, in this passage what it means to "telle a tale after a man" is not yet anchored by the upcoming structure of the *Canterbury Tales*, inviting the possibility that the phrase is multivalent, engaging other potential meanings of tale-telling in medieval English. Some of these meanings are invested in media ecologies, the circulation of information, and its truth-value.¹³ Higden's 1387 translation of Trevisa's *Polychronicon*—which, as Emily Steiner has argued, epitomizes an "age of information" of medieval literature—takes up the phrase to describe Bede's reception of knowledge: "Beda knew neuere that ilond [island] with his eyghe bot some tale tellere tolde hym suche tales."¹⁴ Bede's mediation is relatively neutral here, but elsewhere the term connotes liars and those who willfully corrupt information.

In Langland's account of the attack on the Barn of Unity, for example, "Conscience . . . made Pees porter to pynne the yates [block the gates] / Of [against] alle tale-telleris and titereris [tattlers] in ydel" (20.298–300).¹⁵ An early fifteenth-century lyric uses the phrase in a warning against slander:

Yif suche a tale-tellere were,
 To a kyng apayre a mannys name, *besmirch*
 The kyng shulde bothe partyes here, *hear*
 And punysche the fals for defame.¹⁶ *defamation*

These uses assume an ethics of informatic media, with "tale-tellers" as negative exempla. The noun "tale" itself is also multivalent; it can refer to a neutral contemporary account, a set of historical events, a joke, an adage, the act of speaking, a legal claim, or a numerical quantity (akin to modern English "tally").¹⁷ That Chaucer might be teasing his reader with the multivalence of "tale" before narrowing its meaning, in the announcement of the contest, to a narrative form, is implied by an earlier part of Harry Bailly's speech, in which he anticipates that the pilgrim company "shapen [plan] yow to talen and to pleye" (1.772) on the way to Canterbury, with the verb "talen" here most readily meaning "to converse."¹⁸ With these contexts, the narrator's apology, "Whoso shal telle a tale after a man," refers as much to the pilgrim portraits that precede it as the narratives to follow. In other words, the narrator's tale-telling here might equally refer to his account of the embodied, socially embedded pilgrims as to his rehearsal of their subsequent stories. Moreover, while the apology appears to be proscriptive, describing a narrator who acts as a nearly transparent channel of transmission—"He moot reherce as ny as ever he kan"—the repetition of the auxiliary verb "moot" ("can" or "may") suggests the possibility of the narrator being a noisy channel: "Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe / Or feyne thing, or fynde wordes newe." While many read the disjunction "or" as a warning, with "or ellis" equivalent to "lest," it may also present two alternative modes of transmission between which a narrator can choose: preservation of signal or deliberate introduction of noise.

These contexts suggest that the apology for tale-telling engages with concepts of transmission as much as it anticipates the narrative structure of the *Canterbury Tales* or posits a hermeneutic. Putting the passage in dialogue with Dido's lament in the *House of Fame* suggests an ongoing concern with a poetics of media in Chaucer's work. In short, I am proposing that in these

passages and throughout his work, Chaucer develops a thematic of media transmission implicit in many works of medieval literature. Notwithstanding, both media theorists and scholars of the Middle Ages have resisted, if not rejected outright, the possibility of a fully developed medieval media concept.¹⁹ By “fully developed,” I mean that these theorists and scholars may recognize the existence of particular media in the Middle Ages, and cultural practices and protocols of mediation, but they largely disavow a coherent media theory emerging from these media and practices that would compare to the modern academic media theory that accompanied the saturation of mass communication technologies in the popular culture of the twentieth century. Underlying the resistance to recognizing a medieval media theory, as I discuss further in this book, is an assumption implicit in the title of the founding work of media studies, Marshall McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy*: that without technologies of mass communication, such as the printing press, a media concept cannot develop. Moreover, this lacuna in media theory has persisted even as the field itself has taken two turns that might seem to conduce to a reassessment of medieval media: an archaeological turn that seeks examples of media outside of standard progressive and telic technological histories, and a holistic turn that recognizes media as transcending the kinds of discrete, prosthetic technologies that fueled the field’s creation.²⁰

This book makes two claims. First, it argues that although medieval culture lacked many of the technologies that we associate with media, fully articulated media concepts developed across scientific, administrative, and devotional knowledge domains in the later Middle Ages. While these discourses did not engage with each other’s media theories, in the aggregate they accomplished something the philosopher Mark Hansen attributes to modern media culture: they “mediate[d] the material rhythms of embodied life” for medieval people.²¹ Premodern media consist of materials that transmit meaning across ontological boundaries: between separate persons, the person and the world, or even the person and God. We will see that the pervasive state of being-between generated by secular and devotional epistemologies led medieval people to imagine a range of materials and phenomena as media: for example, bodies, tools, and natural elements as well as media forms more recognizable to modernity, like books and paintings. The centrality of bodies to premodern media theory means that it also encodes the exclusions and restrictions of bodies marked by race and gender that emerged in medieval Western culture, a phenomenon this book will examine at length.

This book's second claim focuses on how this media concept informs what Nicolette Zeeman has called "imaginative theory," which emerges implicitly from works of literature themselves rather than in separate treatises.²² I argue that the central literary project of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is to create a poetics of media informed by the synthesis of medieval media theories. Understanding literature as a product of mediating bodies that are in turn mediated by their environments and instruments creates a literary theory of distributed, networked agency that at best embraces the human and nonhuman world as an interdependent whole, but at worst relies on excluding or restricting bodies marked by race and gender to create a closed media ecology. While "mediation" has long been a critical commonplace in discussions of the *Canterbury Tales*, from Kittredge's 1914 assertion that the tales contain "infinite variety because they are told by a variety of persons" to the critical debates concerning teller-tale relations in the 1980s, these discussions tend to focus on single, central figures—whether a narratorial "persona" or a first-person pronoun—as the sources of these poems.²³ Yet more recent work on voice, character, and fictionality demonstrates that literary characters are embodied assemblages, not discrete individuals or discursive placeholders.²⁴

This capacious understanding of media might seem too large to be meaningful. What is *not* media in the Middle Ages? As it turns out, premodern thinkers were asking the same question. All cultures recognize certain materials as communicative and others as noncommunicative. In medieval Western culture, parchment, stone, wood, glass, and clay frequently communicate language. By contrast, in Indigenous cultures of the Americas, grass and beads communicate meaning, stories, and power relations.²⁵ And while many cultures recognize bodies and environmental elements as communicative media, the ways in which they mediate content can vary dramatically based on cultural practices and discourses. What all medieval media theories have in common is that they reveal and explore a tension in the concept of media: that media are at once distinct material entities *between* the observer and the object—what I call "prosthetic" media—and that media *surround* and *encompass* both observer and object in a continuous media ecology—what I call "ambient" media. As we shall see, this tension between prosthetic and ambient media, originating in the premodern period and informing the philology of the early concept of media, is also central to the modern discipline of media theory as it has developed since the 1960s.

To summarize, medieval media have the following characteristics:

1. Media are materials that communicate between content and audience. “Content” can include objects of perception in the physical world, “information” as defined by secular or sacred epistemologies, or stories and paintings on media like parchment, wood, and glass. In this sense, the noun “media” identifies materials of communication.
2. Materials become media when they mediate content. Throughout this book, I will discuss the “mediating capacities” of bodies, elements, and premodern technologies. Any given material may not always act as a medium; a blank sheet of parchment, for example, is not inherently a medium unless it is conveying a specific content. Likewise, bodies mediate when they are in certain roles, such as storyteller, administrator, or priest. In this sense, the verb “mediate” implies a back-formation of materials into media in specific contexts.
3. Media act in ways determined by their material qualities and their cultural contexts. This is to say, all materials have what Caroline Levine, drawing a term from design theory, has called “affordances”: specific qualities like shape and texture that delimit the ways they can act as media.²⁶ A glass surface mediates an image differently from a wooden one. As such, although media and mediation are sometimes described in passive terms, the insights of new materialism suggest that media can shape meanings through their material agencies.²⁷ Likewise, a raced or gendered body mediates content differently from a body perceived as neutral or normative. Thus, the affordances of specific media depend on the cultural matrix in which they act.
4. Attention to media involves attention to relation. Even as the materiality of media invite us to consider the ontology of these middle terms, they insist on epistemologies of networks, connectivity, transmission, and exchange, resisting epistemologies grounded on closure, totalizing, and autonomy of subjects or objects.
5. Media can act multiply and simultaneously, distributing content and creating the sense of saturation known as *hypermediacy*. When this happens, media can create conflict and irresolution in the content they transmit. But this kind of media saturation can also create an impression of *immediacy*, the illusion that media are absent in the transmission of content. The concepts of hypermediacy and immediacy are discussed further in Chapter 1.

While this list applies to media across many historical and cultural contexts, it derives specifically from the Western medieval media theory this book will elaborate. These five attributes are independent of technological innovation, although as we will see the Middle Ages did “invent” new media, both in terms of new machine technologies and new practices of mediation for transhistorical materials like bodies and elements. Moreover, these attributes apply equally to what we might call “scientific” media, which mediate natural phenomena, and “communicative” or “aesthetic” media, which mediate human-generated content. While these two categories are not entirely distinct in medieval theory, separating them helps us analyze the different branches of premodern media discourse.

Although I began with two visual images that represent premodern media ecologies, this book primarily takes literature as its subject. Within the scribal and performative literary culture of the Middle Ages, literature has a special mobility, able to cross spatial, temporal, and social boundaries. Its mobility makes it particularly subject to transformation as it travels through multiple media—a phenomenon called *remediation* that will be discussed at length in Chapter 1. As we will see, narrative fiction has specific qualities, such as world-building and the centrality of character, that make it rich ground for developing a concept of aesthetic media. Moreover, while the discussion of media theory in medieval art history is relatively advanced, the intersections between media theory and medieval literature merit further examination.²⁸

Thus, it is important to understand the specific media culture of the Middle Ages to recognize how its literature is a media production. The premodern media I will describe in this book served as a basis for Geoffrey Chaucer’s development of a poetics of media in the *House of Fame* and, most extensively, in the *Canterbury Tales*. The Canterbury pilgrims are the latter work’s most obvious media, but its media ecology also includes man-made artifacts and the nonhuman world. Chaucer’s poetics of media examines how the connectivity between persons and the world fostered by material media creates a literature of exchange and network. It further demonstrates how literature itself creates these connections by bodying them forth. Put simply, a poetics of media focuses on *what* communicates as much as *what it* communicates, and explores the former—which is to say, the material medium—as both an agent and a subject of literary making. Media poetics, then, is an aesthetic materialism that emphasizes relation and network over mimesis and representation, encoding cultural practices and norms. The scientific, legal, and spiritual theories of media that circulate in the later Middle Ages underpin

the *Tales'* development of a theory of aesthetic media at once specific to medieval intellectual culture and surprisingly resonant with recent theories of immersive, ambient, and transhistorical media ecologies.

This book demonstrates that medieval media theory appears in both explicit and implicit forms across a range of medieval knowledge domains, and that taking these in the aggregate as a medieval media theory should embolden scholars of the Middle Ages not only to claim media theory as a premodern phenomenon, but also to insist that medieval media theory offers a holistic, systemic media concept that enhances modern media theory and corrects overly simplistic accounts of the Middle Ages in media history. The next section offers an analysis of such accounts and provides an overview of the concept of media that emerged in modernity. Following this analysis, I outline the terms and methods that will be central to the premodern media theory this book explores. The final section of the chapter gives an overview of Chaucer's poetics of media in the *Canterbury Tales* by way of describing the structure of the book.

Media(eval): The Medieval in Media History

"It would seem that the extension of one or another of our senses by mechanical means, such as the phonetic script, can act as a sort of twist for the kaleidoscope of the entire sensorium."²⁹ This statement, from Marshall McLuhan's seminal work of media theory *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, sets a template for writing media histories in which technological shifts usher in new modes of encountering content. Yet this template embeds two assumptions in media studies that have unnecessarily limited the scope of its inquiries. First, even as McLuhan's work takes a broad view of "mechanical means," including premodern technologies like phonetic script, it assumes an epochal history that privileges modernity, in which changes in communications technologies largely take forms legible to twentieth-century audiences: the printing press, radio, television. Second, it understands media as prosthetics to human bodies, extending our senses with discrete tools distinct from the sensing bodies that operate them. In the decades since its 1962 publication (along with its equally influential companion volume, *Understanding Media* [1964]), the field of media studies has often followed McLuhan's epochal, prosthetic template. Yet the past few decades have seen the emergence of media histories of early modern culture and media archaeologies of deep time that have sought

to counter techno-progressivism by defining media as the range of cultural practices and materials that create connectivity and relation.³⁰ Meanwhile, a materialist turn in media studies has promoted exploring media ecologies comprised of nonprivileged relationships among bodies, environments, and technologies.³¹ Such theories replace the prosthetic model by understanding media not as discrete tools but as milieux through which we encounter content of all kinds, aesthetic as well as informatic.

As this section demonstrates, both progressivist and archaeological media historians have largely positioned the Middle Ages as static or latent with respect to the development of media theory. Epochal histories tend to instrumentalize media, privileging a prosthetic technology over an accumulation of cultural effects. As Lisa Gitelman has argued, these kinds of history accord a nuanced dynamism to the present while isolating and stabilizing the past.³² Consequently, they position the premodern as the primitive Other against which modernity arises. More capacious archaeological histories of media, meanwhile, examine discontinuous media phenomena in the classical, early modern, and even prehistoric periods, but largely ignore the Middle Ages. Parsing the logic of media theory periodizations illustrates how a medieval theory of media promises to complicate and expand media history and theory. Relatedly, we will see how the medieval lack of an aesthetic theory that corresponds to Aristotelian mimesis—a significant divergence from what many represent as a theoretical dormancy awaiting Renaissance neoclassicism—makes space for a theory of cultural communication with a specifically medieval concept of media at its center. Finally, modern definitions of media that privilege the biological as much as the technological will lay the groundwork for a transhistorical media concept.

Notwithstanding his progressivism, McLuhan gives a detailed and subtle account of premodern language technics. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* recognizes that the phonetic alphabet constitutes a technology of language that turns sounds into visual signs, which leads to an extensive consideration of how Greek, Roman, and medieval cultures “give[] . . . an eye for an ear,” elevating the status of visibility.³³ These Western scribal cultures underlie the development of the print-era “typographic man,”³⁴ a creature characterized by perspectivism—the orientation of the visual field around a fixed point characteristic of Renaissance art—and “homogeneous repetition,” consisting of expertise in a specific, repeatable task rather than relational social functions.³⁵ The electronic age comprises the final stage of McLuhan’s media history. Technologies that traverse vaster distances than previously imaginable

reorient our sensoria and culture around a global society, in which “our extended faculties and senses now constitute a single field of experience which demands that they become collectively conscious.”³⁶

But McLuhan is somewhat confused as to how to locate the Middle Ages in his history of technology, perhaps because he is constructing a narrative of latency around the premodern, which in his view anticipates without fully realizing cultural features of modernity such as individualism, nationalism, and mechanical reproducibility. He characterizes both Greek antiquity and the European Middle Ages as “oral societies,” even as he simultaneously calls the Middle Ages a scribal culture that unites the visual with the tactile.³⁷ Even more perplexing, it is “the great medieval invention of typography that was the ‘take-off’ moment into the new spaces of the modern world.”³⁸ Is the Middle Ages then the historical origin of a typographic modernity? Is it nonliterate, or is it scribal? Is it unlike the culture of the 1950s and ’60s, when McLuhan was writing, or is it closer to the present “electric age” than the more recent, pre-electric but post-Gutenberg past?³⁹ McLuhan’s confusion can be resolved by subdividing the vast historical expanse that he (and many other media theorists) comfortably unite under the category of the medieval into many centuries of overlapping and shifting cultures, ideologies, and even technologies. Thus if we understand the ten centuries and multiple cultures that comprise medieval Europe to include oral cultures of vernacular composition, as well as vigorously textual and scribal monasteries and universities organized across the Continent and beyond according to affiliation rather than geography or birth language, McLuhan’s various distinctions start to make sense. In fact, McLuhan knew this history—as his detailed discussion of, for instance, medieval scholasticism makes clear—and flattened it in favor of a progressive narrative that demanded medieval latency.

Where McLuhan identifies the specific technological advances that ushered in new modes of mediation, Friedrich Kittler characterizes the history of language production and use as a series of discontinuous “discourse networks,” with ruptures around 1800 and 1900. The pre-1800 discourse network is the “Republic of Scholars,” a system of textual reference and commentary available only to an educated elite. Its methods produce a closed, self-referential system. “The Republic of Scholars is endless circulation, a discourse network without producers or consumers, which simply heaves words around.”⁴⁰ This is, of course, a textual culture that begins in the monasteries of the Middle Ages and flourishes with the rise of the universities, institutions that defined their primary knowledge products as textual

commentaries. Kittler makes the distinction between this medieval discourse network and that of 1800 starkly apparent: “Historians differentiate between two types of culture with regard to writing: a culture of the scribe, in which the ability to write is a privilege and thus a function of the ruling class; and a culture of the learned, in which reading and writing are coupled together and thus can be universalized. . . . The discourse network of 1800 was . . . a [learned] culture in which reading and writing were coupled and automatized. The purpose of this coupling was a universal education.”⁴¹ Unlike McLuhan’s model of “latency” in medieval culture, Kittler argues for a rupture between “medieval” scribal culture and the discourse network that emerges around 1800. The former is characterized by the separation of functions (copying versus composing or reading, dictating versus writing) that perpetuates a literate ruling class that is also a theocracy. One of Kittler’s key insights lies in characterizing what many would call Romanticism—an aesthetic philosophy—as a consequence of the rise of new mechanisms of language production around 1800.

Kittler’s characterization of medieval scribal culture as segmented, theocratic, and (implicitly) masculine is true primarily (although not entirely) until the thirteenth century in Europe, when monasteries dominated textual production. The proliferation of universities in thirteenth-century Europe created new centers of textual production and circulation. Works of natural philosophy from classical and Arabic scholars were widely copied, as were literary histories and romances. As women swelled the ranks of professional religious, they learned to read, copy, and in some cases compose their own works, as in the cases most famously of Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich. This point is not meant to dispute Kittler’s identification of a particular shift that occurred around 1800, especially in his native Germany, in the technologies of language learning. Rather, my point is that Kittler’s theories work best when this moment of rupture is understood as a departure from the *recent* past rather than from a static, centuries-long textual culture.

Even as legions of media and cultural theorists have critiqued these histories and the presentism of so-called new media studies, attempts to correct this bias largely explore early modernity. To take one example, John Guillory’s influential 2010 essay, “The Genesis of the Media Concept,” has a different aim than the seminal works of McLuhan and Kittler. Rather than identifying significant moments of rupture in media history, he traces a philology of “media” and “mediation” throughout early modernity. According to Guillory’s interpretation, the permutations of these two terms usher in a theory of

communications—the “media concept”—that displaces classical aesthetics as the framework for understanding art: “[in] the whole of their former history [before the later nineteenth century], poetry, painting, music, and other so-called fine arts were not dominated by the concept of communication but by imitation or mimesis, defined—it would seem for all time—by Aristotle in his *Poetics*.”⁴² However, mass media technologies beginning with the printing press demand a new theoretical framework: “the concept of a medium of communication was absent but *wanted* for the several centuries prior to its appearance, a lacuna in the philosophical tradition that exerted a distinctive pressure, as if from the future, on early efforts to theorize communication.”⁴³ Guillory’s argument aggregates the classical era, the Middle Ages, and the early modern period under the banner of mimetic aisthesis. These periods before the printing press are static with respect to communication theory; the early modern period, from roughly the late fifteenth to the mid-nineteenth century is the period of latency, “want[ing]” a concept and “exert[ing] a distinctive pressure” on a future that would realize its desire.

Guillory aims to account for what he sees as a fundamental shift in aesthetic theory, from the work of art as a representation of reality to the work of art as that which exists in media and is remediated. Its main historic trajectory runs from Francis Bacon in the Renaissance to Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson in the twentieth century, by way of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Raymond Williams, and Charles Sanders Peirce. With painstaking analysis, Guillory demonstrates that an idea of *mediation*, a concept explored in this long philosophical tradition, precedes that of an aesthetic medium. Hegel, in particular, introduces the idea of mediated relations as a social theory to displace simpler models of causality. Later communications theory narrows the scope of philosophical mediation precisely by yoking it to media, “a reduction of the social totality to communication as its representative instance.”⁴⁴ As a backdrop, Guillory notes that Aristotle’s *Poetics* contains no Greek equivalent for the word *media*. The treatise distinguishes the arts of painting, dance, poetry, and so forth, in a passage that later translators sometimes rendered with *medium/a*, but subsequently Aristotle “sets the question of medium aside, *where it remained for two millennia*.”⁴⁵ Western modernity, considered by Guillory in an expansive, four-century scope, is thus marked by an increasing understanding of art in relation to its mediating technologies. Even as Guillory notes that “mediation cannot be reduced to an effect of technical media,” his account of a shift in Western aesthetic theory, from Aristotelian mimesis or representation to

media, relies on the visibility of mediation made possible by new technologies such as the printing press.⁴⁶

But Aristotelian aesthetic theory did not, in fact, hold uninterrupted dominance in the West prior to the nineteenth century. Although the *Poetics* was translated into Latin in the Middle Ages, it remained largely unknown in the West.⁴⁷ Instead Aristotle was primarily regarded as a natural philosopher—a scientist—following his thirteenth-century European rediscovery; and indeed, Aristotle's scientific works are deeply concerned with media and name it explicitly, as we will see in the next chapter. It is true that medieval people did not recognize painting, music, and literature as media united by the common category of fine art, and they had no category corresponding to the aesthetic theory of earlier or later centuries. Rather, they had different disciplines for the study of each kind of art. Music was a branch of mathematics; poetry, a form of rhetoric. Perhaps for these reasons, Guillory's history, as careful and intricate as it is in exploring the four centuries of Western modernity, implicitly represents the Middle Ages as a static, noiseless channel with respect to aesthetics or, as he sometimes calls it, "culture."⁴⁸ In part, this conclusion is due to his methodology, which traces uses of the English words *media* and *mediation* primarily as witnessed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, whose medieval examples are relatively sparse and which does not include cognates in French or Latin, two languages in which medieval English people were more likely to write. Guillory does note that one early usage of *mediation* recorded by the *OED* coheres with what he identifies as a much later usage within a theory of communication. The example in question is from Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe* from 1390: "by mediacioun of this litel tretys, I purpose to teche the a certein nombre of conclusions" (11). As J. Allan Mitchell has shown, the *Treatise* offers an imaginative framework for thinking about the instrumentalism of texts and scientific apparatus that outstrips the single, limited use of "mediacioun" that Guillory takes to anticipate modern media theory.⁴⁹ But for Guillory, Chaucer's usage is the exception that proves the rule, a glimmer of a media concept that would go undeveloped for several centuries.⁵⁰ Chaucer, in his account, is a latent figure of early modern mediation trapped in the static Middle Ages.

Anna Kornbluh's *Immediacy: or, the Style of Too Late Capitalism* implies a longer range for the history of mediation without specifically mentioning the Middle Ages. Kornbluh argues that mediation has been a consistent feature of Western philosophy and aesthetics until very recently, when the rise of immediacy—immersive art experiences, autofiction, authenticity as

self-branding—overtook the discrete and distinct media previously assumed to be requisite in making art or any kind of representation. She relates the concept of style to medium as a specific historicizing feature that mediation permits: “style marks the features of an event, era, text, or form as having been made. It thus indexes work: effort was expended to configure a *what* [the medium] in this particular *how* [style].”⁵¹ In this analysis, as media offer a transhistorical conceptual foundation for artistic making, style anchors the work of art to its specific historicity. Kornbluh understands mediation, and its related use of discrete media, as a feature of the *longue durée* of Western art prior to the twenty-first century. When she historicizes in more explicit ways, she cites prehistoric, classical, and post-Enlightenment examples: cave paintings, Aristotelian aesthetics, cultural theory from Marx to Stuart Hall.

As Kornbluh limns a sweeping historical narrative that includes the Middle Ages without explicitly naming examples from the period, she follows a template established by the subfield of media theory known as media archaeology, which seeks to counter technocentric presentism even as it tends to overlook medieval media and its theories. The founding work of the field, Siegfried Zielinski’s *Deep Time of the Media*, aims to resist progressivist media history, noting that “the history of the media is not the product of a predictable and necessary advance from primitive to complex apparatus”; rather, “media are spaces of action for constructed attempts to connect what is separate,” and as such, a deep time approach must examine the “periods of particularly intensive and necessary work on this effort.”⁵² Zielinski cuts a broad swath, considering Empedocles and Italian Renaissance scientists, but largely occludes the Middle Ages. While crucial to expanding the concept of media, Zielinski’s examples set the template for many subsequent works of media archaeology that elide the medieval in favor of examining classical, early modern, and even prehistoric media.⁵³ Such accounts do important work in expanding the concept of media across time, and of illuminating how particular historic contexts shape and are shaped by their specific media and practices of mediation. They are less invested in totalizing the Middle Ages than are progressive histories of media; rather, they treat the period with a kind of benign neglect that reflects individual scholarly proclivities more than polemical aims. These archaeological histories of media tend toward a discontinuous analysis that pinpoints certain events, technologies, and systems as salient across deep time.

Yet some media historians have developed a concept of ambient, relational media centered on the interactions between bodies and technologies

that not only facilitates transhistorical theorizing but also, unintentionally, creates continuity with certain aspects of medieval media theory. Gitelman “define[s] media as socially recognized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation.”⁵⁴ Clifford Siskin and William Warner outline a set of “cardinal mediations,” a capacious category including infrastructures, genres and forms, associational practices, and protocols, that inaugurate the Enlightenment.⁵⁵ Such definitions of mediation emphasize the social connectivity afforded by media over its technological prostheses; Gitelman “urge[s] that the histories of new media be sought amid uses and users, rather than simply amid descriptions of product development.”⁵⁶ In particular, these theories understand media as the materials and systems that underlie profound social, cultural, and ideological shifts.

While Gitelman, Siskin, and Warner tend to organize their media histories around historically specific technologies, such as the phonograph or periodicals, other theorists recognize a broader range of material forms necessary for users to experience mediation: in particular, bodies and the natural world, “socially recognized structures of communication” that, as we shall see, medieval people recognized and theorized as media. Centering both informatic and aesthetic communication in the body has implications for all historical periods, from premodern to postmodern.⁵⁷ As N. Katherine Hayles observes, for the posthuman subject “the entanglement of signal and materiality in bodies and books confers on them a parallel doubleness.”⁵⁸ Although Hayles’s definition still sets the body at a remove from the medium, the art historian Hans Belting goes further, in a study that examines image-making from prehistoric times to the present day: “I would contend that our bodies themselves operate as a living medium by processing, receiving, and transmitting images.”⁵⁹ Mark Hansen argues that technologies are embedded in our embodied lives, determining their patterns and rhythms in ways that determine our phenomenal and social experience.⁶⁰

Recognizing the body’s role in mediating content helps make visible other nontechnological materials that act as media; in particular, the natural world. John Durham Peters has developed a philosophy of what he calls “elemental media,” such as ocean, fire, and sky. For Peters, understanding natural phenomena as media means understanding “communication as disclosure of being rather than clarity of signal.”⁶¹ That is, communication is primarily

ontological and only secondarily informatic. Accordingly, Peters redefines his central term: "Media are our infrastructures of being, the habitats and materials through which we act and are."⁶² In this definition, a medium is an object or phenomenon that humans recognize as a structure for communicating presence. Peters's theory takes literally the long-standing concept of the "media ecology," a phrase that dates back to the 1960s, when it was used as a metaphor of a pervasive mediascape.⁶³ It is part of a broader recent examination of "ambient" or "environmental" cultural effects (two terms that, as we shall see, have deep linguistic connections to "media").⁶⁴

While I am indebted to scholars whose work has, by examining pre-twentieth-century media, elucidated the complex media theories of pre-electronic eras, I nonetheless see a bias toward newness—especially new technologies and communication systems—in many of these works. History is full of the new, of course, but not every culture fetishizes newness in the way that is specific to the postindustrial West. Medieval people in fact felt deep ambivalence toward newness, and were at once excited by and wary of new discourses and technologies.⁶⁵ And to build a history around new technologies or systems is not unlike building a history around events (the Fall of Rome, World War II) that can obscure the patterns of human life on which these events have varying magnitudes of effects.⁶⁶ Despite many differences, all media theories agree that a medium is a material through which we communicate. The two key terms in this definition, material and communicate, together underlie almost every discipline of study, and as a result, media studies intersect with physical sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. Thus, there is a different way to frame the emergence of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century communications theory with respect to media, mediation, and culture. Rather than imagining that distinct theories of mediation converge with communications theory as their telos, as Guillory has it, we can see modern communications theory as a specific instance of adapting a broader cultural concept (Zielinski's "spaces of action for constructed attempts to connect what is separate," Peters's "infrastructures of being") to a techno-historical moment. And one instance of this broader cultural concept occurs in the later Middle Ages, when an intricate, fully articulated media theory develops that understands bodies, environment, and material texts as interdependent parts of a media ecology. Taken together, these premodern media theories better represent the distributed and decentralized experience of media today and suggest that we might construct a media history that acknowledges the persistence of medieval media thinking.

Understanding Premodern Media: Terms and Methods

To begin to understand premodern media, we must examine some key terms and concepts. The first is, of course, media. While Guillory's study offers an extensive modern philology of the English word *media*, in studying medieval media it is helpful to understand the word within its longer multilingual history. In the West, a significant era in the history of the media concept begins with James of Venice's twelfth-century Latin translations of Aristotle's *Physics* and *On the Soul*, revised by William of Moerbeke between 1260 and 1270. The Latin *medium/a* appears throughout these works, in ways we will examine in greater depth in the next chapter, to describe physical and perceptual phenomena. It translates the Greek τὸ μεταξύ (*to metaxu*), or "the between." While the Greek term nominalizes a preposition, its translation as a Latin substantive concretizes what is relational. As such, it creates a new realm of discourse that transforms the understanding of the natural world and the human place in it, and entrenches the prosthetic sense of media that is central to the development of modern media theory. It is also important to recognize a second Greek source for *medium/-a*. As Leo Spitzer has observed, in the Middle Ages, the Latin word is also used to translate τὸ περιέχον (*to periekhon*), "that which surrounds, encompasses."⁶⁷ In a philological tour de force, Spitzer traced *to periekhon* through its linguistic and conceptual permutations with particular attention to its associations with atmosphere, air, and climate. Ultimately, the word's conceptual spectrum splinters into the separate but related English words *ambience*, *milieu*, and *medium*. Spitzer's study not only is etymological but also demonstrates how the linguistic and conceptual framework of what surrounds a body in space changes its valences over time. It offers a transhistorical and transcultural account of the permutations of a concept, which, as it moves through Latin (*ambire*, *circumscribere*, *continere*, *medium/mediare*) and French (*milieu*), differentiates specific elemental environments (air, ether, ocean) from a persistent ontological state of ambience that preserves the classical sense of encompassing and surrounding.⁶⁸ But with the translation of *to metaxu* as *medium* in the later Middle Ages, the concept of media becomes richly multivalent. The elements surrounding a body no longer only embrace or encompass it (the sense of *to periekhon*); they are also distinct material entities that communicate between the subject and object of perception (*to metaxu*).

In short, this linguistic and conceptual history makes but also blurs the distinction between prosthetic (discrete, instrumentalized) media and ambient

(continuous, environmental) media. The ontology of media is thereby ambiguous. This indeterminacy affects the related terms that I will employ throughout this book, *mediator* and *mediation*. For the purposes of this study, I use the term *mediator* to describe any agent that mediates: human, technological, environmental, spiritual. *Mediation* refers to the actions and effects of such mediators across multiple premodern knowledge domains: scientific, devotional, and aesthetic. In medieval English, Latin, and French, the cognates of these words had specific social and administrative meanings that I will examine in subsequent chapters. While distinct from the Aristotelian sense of *media*, we shall see that these multiple meanings all inform the medieval media concept.

Notwithstanding the pervasiveness of mediation in the Middle Ages, the intersection of media theory and medieval studies is relatively recent. The valuable work of scholars of the Middle Ages who draw on concepts from media theory—including virtuality, cyberspace, and manuscripts as media—tends to deny the possibility of a medieval media theory, instead retrofitting modern media theory to medieval objects and practices.⁶⁹ Even the most extended study to date of medieval media, Christian Kiening's *Mediality in the Middle Ages*, draws a strong periodizing line, asserting that studying the Middle Ages permits "the observation of media conditions *before* the development of media discourses. Such a discourse becomes tangible in the seventeenth century, for example, when theoretical, systematic, and encyclopedic works attempted to comprehend and classify the new medium of the newspaper."⁷⁰ Kiening introduces a concept of what he calls "mediality" to the Middle Ages, a term that emphasizes the methodological, rather than ontological, qualities of medieval media. This approach is less invested in identifying objects (e.g., the book) as media than in using a set of relations between materials, forms, and use-contexts as a basis for mediation.⁷¹ Even as Kiening's work demonstrates the many forms of media in the Middle Ages and identifies medieval discourses of media from theology and philosophy, it largely reserves the idea of "media" for the narrowly prosthetic model developed for the technologies of modernity. Yet as the concepts described by the philologies of *to periekhon* and *to metaxu* indicate, the medieval media ecology corresponds much more closely to contemporary media theories that draw on feminist, new materialist, and ecocritical methodologies, expanding the communicative and informatic emphases of early media studies to embrace the relational and ontological. From the posthuman figure of the body enmeshed in a technoscape to the environmental elements like air and

water, these theories demonstrate how the media of communication attest to human and nonhuman presence.⁷² Our study of the scientific, legal, and spiritual theories of medieval media in the coming chapters at once draws on this theoretical framework and illuminates its premodern foundations.

Some of these foundations are found in medieval semiotics. Augustine defines a sign as “a thing which of itself makes some other thing come to mind, besides the impression that it presents to the senses”—which is to say, a sign is at once a mental concept and an external object.⁷³ As such, signs imply a third, communicative term that can translate between the sensed sign and the mental sign. This formulation leads to Augustine’s concept of speech, which exists to communicate signs from one mind to another.⁷⁴ In the thirteenth century, Roger Bacon develops the relationality inherent in Augustine’s communicative concept of the sign. Countering a common logic in medieval semiotics that understood a sign to be independent of its interpreter, Bacon insists that the concept of a sign relies on the existence of an interpreter. “A sign stands in the category Relation and is spoken of essentially with respect to that [interpreter] to which it signifies, because it places that [interpreter] in act when the sign itself is in act, and in potentiality when it is in potentiality. Unless someone could conceive through a sign, it would be useless and empty.”⁷⁵ That is, a sign requires *both* a signifying word or object *and* an implied audience (the “interpreter”). Yet where Augustine and many of his medieval followers understood spoken words to convey the mental concept of the sign, Bacon argues that words mediate the external object itself.⁷⁶ Notwithstanding the differences in their particulars, both strands of thought require a communicative medium. That is to say, while semiotics centers on the making of meaning, its medieval history acknowledges that meaning-making occurs by way of transmission through imperfect channels.

This leads to an aesthetic question: did a media concept inform medieval artists’ understanding of their creations? That is to say, to what extent did these artists see their work as *representation*, in the classical and neoclassical aesthetic theory that derives from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and to what extent did they understand it as *mediation*? Art historians have explored these questions most thoroughly, long asserting that medieval visual art is less interested in mimetic representation than in its ritual and social effects, recalling Anna Kornbluh’s definition of mediation as “the active process of relating.”⁷⁷ In fact, even the best-known instrument and metaphor of mimetic representation, the mirror, had a distinct function and valence in medieval art. While M. H. Abrams’s *The Mirror and the Lamp* famously used the two titular images to

differentiate the neoclassical realism of early modernity from the Romantic aesthetic of transcendence, these aesthetic meanings were combined in medieval theories and uses of mirrors. Altar crucifixes incorporating mirrors at once reflected the viewer's sinfulness back to her, and (like gems or gold) reflected light to suggest God's presence.⁷⁸ Theologians and artists explicitly described and depicted mirrors as mediators between the immediate divine presence and postlapsarian humanity.⁷⁹ As a name for a genre of treatise, the *speculum* is also, of course, a textual mediator that permits the transfer of knowledge, with treatises that "mirror" Christ's Passion acting as media for communication between God and man.⁸⁰ In medieval culture, the mirror/speculum is thus not so much a figurative image as a material medium that itself figures a broader concept of art as that which exists in media; and conversely, of media as what give artworks meaning.

Studying medieval media requires a conceptual language to describe communication, which we draw from both modern and premodern media theories. However, it is also important to attend to the specific medieval discourses that express or imply media concepts distinct from modern usages. Medieval aesthetics, while largely implicit and practical rather than theoretical, require an idea of media because of dual commitments to the secular and the sacred. At the same time, medieval art and literature only existed in the *saeculum*, as material productions experienced by material bodies. Thus, medieval media concepts often rely on Christian ontologies that actively seek to understand communication between God and humanity through mediators, including Christ, saints, professional religious, and even the natural world. They might also be fully secular, as in profane literature's concern with the environmental, human, and technical media through which it is communicated. As Kiening points out, any medieval medium is "a form of communication that absorbs its own boundary into itself and, due to its paradoxical structure, has the effect of forming groups or institutions in a specific way: it allows varying inclusions and exclusions, and diverse medial imaginings."⁸¹

The synthesis of multiple knowledge domains to describe premodern media theory, then, is the methodology of this book. Accurately describing medieval media for a modern audience requires a methodology that embraces the media theories of the past as much as the present. And it also takes as foundational McLuhan's evocative image of media as "a sort of twist for the kaleidoscope of the entire sensorium."⁸² The structure of this book, as I describe it here, is kaleidoscopic: each chapter brings into focus a different domain of medieval media, with three sections organizing them into

broad categories, in order to explore multiple medieval discourses in depth. Admittedly capacious, this structure is inspired by the proliferation of medieval media thinking as well as by Chaucer's trenchant and innovative poetics of media. The throughlines that synthesize these discourses into a medieval media theory can, I hope, embolden scholars of the Middle Ages not only to claim media theory as part of premodern intellectual history, but also to insist that medieval media theory offers a holistic, systemic media concept that modern media theory has only lately begun to articulate.

A Poetics of Media in the *Canterbury Tales*

This project was motivated by a question that arose while reading Chaucer: why, inasmuch as he creates indelible characters, does he seem more interested in their permeability, inconsistency, and relationality with their physical and textual environments than in the "autonomy" or "subjectivity" that we ascribe to post-Enlightenment literary characters (or indeed, poetic speakers)? I will elaborate in Chapter 1 on critical character theory, but I would like to preview, here, the idea of the poetics of media in Chaucer's work that this book develops. For, no medieval English poet addresses, explores, and troubles the medieval media concept more directly than Geoffrey Chaucer. The *House of Fame* and the *Canterbury Tales* figure their narrator "Geffrey" as a mediator of narrative, and his body as a narrative medium, whether of the "tidings" promised by the heaven-sent eagle in the former or of the tales of the pilgrim company in the latter. Chaucer's first-person narrator has medieval cognates in literary forebears like Dante and in contemporaries like Langland. But Chaucer's poems explore literary narration within a well-theorized media ecology. The *Canterbury Tales* frequently takes up mediation as a theme, from the *General Prologue's* passage on "tale-tellers" analyzed above, to the centrality of "mediacioun" as a strategy of distributing agency in the *Man of Law's Tale*, to the bailiff mediators of the *Friar's Tale*, to the mediations of spiritual intercessors explored in the *Prioress's* and *Parson's Tales*. The *House of Fame*, as an important proving ground for many of the literary and theoretical investments of the *Canterbury Tales*, represents its narrator within a media ecology that implicates tale-telling in medieval media theory. The frame of the *Canterbury Tales* and many of the *Tales* themselves take up media and/or mediation as a theme in their scientific, legal, and spiritual senses.

And while “media” is a fairly recent addition to the critical lexicon, “mediation” has long been a commonplace in discussions of Chaucer’s poetry, especially the *Canterbury Tales*. In 1914, George Kittredge asserted that the work contains “an infinite variety, because they are told by a variety of persons,” reading the *Tales* as a drama of relations between its pilgrim characters.⁸³ While subsequent generations of scholars embraced Kittredge’s persona theory as a hermeneutic, it was subject to fresh scrutiny in the teller-tale debates associated with the 1980s. Some scholars have embraced the centrality of the pilgrims and their corresponding *General Prologue* portraits to the reading of their tales, particularly in the order assigned in the Ellesmere manuscript.⁸⁴ Readings in this vein often embrace a modern idea of literary character that understands the pilgrims as totalizable persons whose fictional psychologies and experiences inform the material and literary style of their tales. Others have argued against the deterministic reading of any given *Tale* through a teller assigned in an unstable textual tradition of an unfinished work, emphasizing mediations that exist exclusively in the realm of the linguistic, discursive, and textual.⁸⁵ Informed by post-structuralism, such readings tend to privilege voice over character and note that the instabilities of language, medieval poetics and textual transmission belie the model of the speaking subject created in modernity. As more recent critical work on voice, narration, and fictionality has demonstrated, accurately understanding Chaucer’s pilgrims requires modulating between these approaches.⁸⁶ Medieval “characters,” these studies suggest, are assemblages rather than discrete individuals. Yet as we will see, these characters grow from Chaucer’s broader interest in how bodies, tools, supernatural forces, and the nonhuman environment act as media for the communication of literary meanings and aesthetics. In centering what is between, the *Tales* collocate the entities that media connect.

Exploring how narrators mediate content in the *Canterbury Tales* is an instance of a larger debate over unity and multiplicity in the work. As Katharine Zieman has trenchantly observed, this foundational division, epitomized in the modes of reading put forth by D. W. Robertson and E. Talbot Donaldson, has continued to inform critical arguments and modes of reading the *Canterbury Tales*.⁸⁷ Robertson’s monumental work on the *Canterbury Tales*, *A Preface to Chaucer*, locates the key hermeneutic of Chaucer interpretation in the Augustinian tradition, tracing all of Chaucer’s meanings to the theological authority. By contrast Donaldson argued for intense local engagement with Chaucer’s poetics, with the poet’s formal and stylistic choices guiding interpretation.⁸⁸ In the *Tales*, Chaucer has created a work that is structurally

multiple even as its individual tales conduce to readings that isolate and totalize them. In addition to the durable mode of dramatic reading inaugurated by Kittredge, such readings include methods that are stylistic/generic (e.g., in the work of Charles Muscatine and Helen Cooper), sociopolitical (Jill Mann and David Wallace), and post-structuralist (David Lawton and A. C. Spearing).⁸⁹ All of these approaches tend to center the human, as literary creator, character, and/or political actor. But they do not fully account for the nonhuman and/or connective forces central to the production of literature. A media poetics allows us—as it allowed Chaucer—to recognize the ways in which nonhuman actors are essential to the production of literary meaning. Such actors might belong to the so-called natural world—the elements and animals we define as nonhuman—or they might belong to the mechanical world, the tools that we have created to extend our senses, in McLuhan's conceit.

A media poetics, in short, expresses the centrality of both human and nonhuman actors in the making of literary meanings. Inasmuch as such a poetics explores the aesthetic potential of media ecologies, it is akin to what Timothy Morton has called the "ecological thought." Defined roughly as the idea "that everything is interconnected,"⁹⁰ the ecological thought also speaks to the concerns that are typically within the domain of literature, including: "love loss, despair, and compassion . . . [:] amazement, open-mindedness, and wonder . . . [:] doubt, confusion, and skepticism . . . [:] delight, beauty, ugliness, disgust, irony, and pain . . . [:] consciousness and awareness . . . [:] ideology and critique . . . [:] reading and writing . . . [:] race, class, and gender . . . [:] sexuality . . . [:] ideas of self and the weird paradoxes of subjectivity . . . [:] society . . . [and] coexistence."⁹¹ The capaciousness of Morton's ecological thought shares many resonances with the idea of connectivity that I am putting forth with the concept of a media poetics. In orienting this study around the specific focal point of "media," I emphasize the material *between* self and world that facilitates the communication between the two (the prosthetic sense) as well as the ontology of relation created by a culture of media saturation (the ambient sense). The concept of the media ecology shorthands Morton's capaciousness while reminding us that such connectivities are forged by media, the materials through which we perceive and receive.

Moreover, because bodies are central media in most medieval media theories, the cultural marking of individual bodies with categories like race and gender inform a medieval theory of media. Feminist, queer, and critical race theories are thus essential for describing how medieval bodies were imagined as media; as scholars working at the vanguard of these fields have argued, even

in the absence of modern identity affiliations, medieval bodies were marked according to these categories.⁹² Thus, the work of Julia Kristeva, Sara Ahmed, Geraldine Heng, Cord Whitaker, and others have informed my understanding of how bodies marked by gender, sexuality, and/or race exist and act in a world informed by a media concept. As I discuss in greater detail later in the book, Kristeva's concepts of abjection and of the maternal *chora* offer embodied, secular cognates for a medieval spiritual concept of mediation that locates certain kinds of physical presence between subjects and objects.⁹³ Medieval critical race theory has examined how, before the advent of modern Western conceptions of race emerging with the transatlantic slave trade and Enlightenment epistemologies, power relations structured around bodily difference coalesced in the Middle Ages. While medieval Europeans did not delineate the races using our modern categories, they did racialize groups according to qualities such as skin color and religion. As Heng and Whitaker have demonstrated, these categories were reified in literary and visual representations of bodies, giving racialized physical characteristics aesthetic and hermeneutic meanings that reinforced racialized power relations.⁹⁴ Such representations, while far from mimetic, affected the ways in which bodies mediated and were understood as media. Further, Sara Ahmed's concept of "extension" in the phenomenology of nonnormative (queer, gendered, raced) bodies describes how the capacity of bodies to extend themselves in space relies on their location in a cultural hierarchy.⁹⁵ Ahmed's theory suggests how the concept of "extension" instrumentalizes certain marked bodies for exploitation or indeed rejection as media, and, as we will see, it allows us to advance McLuhan's prosthetic model of media as "the extensions of man" by locating them within a cultural matrix of difference. In the final two chapters of this book, raced and gendered medieval media become especially visible in the context of a Christian paradox of mediated immediacy, resulting from an irresolvable tension between universal salvation and exclusion determined by bodily difference.

In sum, the poetics of media in the *Canterbury Tales* offers a way of understanding the work's aesthetic basis that is grounded in a recognition of the conceptual unity of the diverse discourses of premodern media. Literary making, the work suggests, is at once material and relational—which is to say, an overarching aesthetics of connectivity results from integrating the disparate medieval media concepts. While the pilgrim narrators are the most vivid and apparent of these media, the concept recurs at many scales throughout the work as the principle of its poetics.

The Structure of This Book

This book argues that a premodern media concept emerges in the later Middle Ages across diverse knowledge domains, and that further, this media concept implies an aesthetic materialism that emphasizes relation and network over mimesis and representation. Thus, the book's chapters provide thick descriptions of medieval media theory by elaborating on each of these types of mediation in their premodern context and analyze how Chaucer's poetry develops their aesthetic implications. This book is divided into three parts that explore distinct modes of later medieval media. Part I, "*Saeculum*," describes how bodies and the nonhuman world were understood as physical and narrative media in secular contexts. The first chapter, "Ambient Media and Literary Narration," describes how the medieval science of mediated perception informs literary narration. The Aristotelian physics newly available in later medieval England, following the thirteenth-century translation of the philosopher's works into Latin, demonstrates how sense perception occurs through environmental media, such as air and water. The ambience of this media ecology creates an effect that modern media theorists Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin describe as a "double logic" of remediation, which occurs when proliferating media create a simultaneous impression of immediacy and hypermediacy. The mediation of bodily perception by the ambient environment forms the grounds of narrative, foregrounding the sensing body and the sensed world as media of textual and cultural meaning. We see this most clearly in Chaucer's *House of Fame*, which explores how ambient media create new possibilities for tale-telling through the distributed media of bodies, voices, images, and the written word, and in the *Thopas-Melibee* sequence of the *Canterbury Tales*, which posits the extreme poles of sensual excess and sensory deprivation as the grounds of literary making. These Chaucerian works extrapolate a *communicative* and *aesthetic* theory of media from an Aristotelian *scientific* theory of media.

While media are central to premodern theories of sense perception, administrative roles assigned to specific human bodies determine how these bodies act as media and wield external media, which are central to understanding how media organize power. Chapter 2, "'Goddess Instrumentz': Offices and Their Media," argues that the medieval concept of the "office" is a media concept that defines the communicative powers inhering in official bodies and their administrative apparatus. In the thirteenth century, a bureaucracy of mediation emerged in England with the replacement of

feudalism by seignorial administration and the transformation of the legal system. Within this context, the idea of “office,” formerly a classical and patristic ethical concept, expands to include administrative meanings with juridical communicative powers. The emerging administrative structures of the later Middle Ages put legacy media like bodies and whisper networks into contact with newer media like legal documents. Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *Friar’s Tale* imagine how the shifting meaning of “office” determines the relationship between old and new media in their images of protean bodies and manipulable apparatus that mediate institutional meanings and power relations. Such bureaucratic media encode gender as they shape and are shaped by the female bodies whose meanings they attempt to regulate. These tales suggest that the official affordances of media can at once generate literary character and narrative and encode later medieval power structures.

Where the book’s first part centers the local and insular, from the sensing body to specifically English political and legal apparatuses, its second and third parts explore how the idea of distance inherent to media encodes race and gender in its aesthetic theory. The second part, “*Technê*,” explores how premodern technologies mediate narratives, but also how literature creates an instrumental media ecology that organizes media with respect to an Orientalized imaginative geography. Chapter 3, “Networks of Transmission,” shows how medieval media networks, such as trade routes and itineraries of cultural exchange, structured communication. In a premodern context, bodies, voices, texts, human actions, and nonhuman forces are all nodes in a media network that distribute agency in the transmission of knowledge and culture. These media operate within a European ideology of east-to-west, masculinized cultural transfer that was especially popular in medieval England, which understood itself as the successor of Greco-Roman antiquity. Yet the ungovernable noise of communication via media complicates the linearity of this model. In this chapter, I introduce the term *transmission* to describe the noise of mediated communication in ways that challenge the medieval concept of “translation” that encodes communicative linearity; I also use modern network theory concepts of “mesh,” “lag,” and “flicker” to describe medieval networks of communication. The transmission of texts, bodies, justice, or scientific knowledge within these medieval networks is captured in the Middle English term *mediacioun*. The chapter demonstrates Chaucer’s aesthetic development of these concepts in the *Man of Law’s Tale*, a tale of early Christian conversion that follows the itinerant holy woman Constance in her journeys between Rome, Syria, and England. Modern communications theory

grounds a reading of the tale's multivalent use of the term *mediacioun* alongside Constance's much-debated passivity, within a concept of a distributed transmission or "mesh" network. Substituting a model of mediating networks of textual transmission for the reprisals of the opening "quiting" sequence, *The Man of Law's Tale* reveals how literature emerges from premodern media networks that construct, even as they question, an East-West binarism.

The following chapter, "Veil and Knot: Media Technologies of Fiction," takes up the question of how medieval technoculture contributes to the premodern media ecology and the aesthetics it inspired. While the book as a whole emphasizes nonmechanical premodern media, the later Middle Ages also had a rich culture of mechanical innovation that, like many of its literary influences, emerged from its global trade and communication networks. Subjects of fascination, wonder, and apprehension, mechanical and marvelous objects inspired new affective, philosophical, and literary discourses that enter into a complex dialectic with legacy media like the codex. This chapter examines the role of technology in a media poetics of romance, exploring how this genre known for representing mechanical marvels also thinks through their capacities as narrative media. It argues that two medieval metaphors of the text, the *integumentum*, or veil, and the *nodus*, or knot, describe the role of mechanical and codicological media in romance. Analyses of the *Squire's Tale* and *Franklin's Tale* demonstrate how these two metaphors express a later medieval geopolitics of media that divides Orientalist wonders from domestic book production.

While the first two parts of the book focus on secular concepts of media, the final part, "*Spiritus*," turns toward the media of later medieval religious practices. Chapter 5, "Extending Bodies: Gender and Race in Spiritual Media," draws on critical race and feminist theory to examine how practices of lay devotion build on a media concept central to Christian theology and develop it within an emerging biopolitics of a gendered, racialized Christianity. While incarnational theology had long necessitated media to communicate between God and man, the rise of affective piety and pastoral care in the later Middle Ages led to a proliferation of saintly and priestly intermediaries. A media concept develops from the devotional practices that multiplied the embodied spiritual media communicating between God and the penitent, even as they reinscribed gendered and racialized schemata of embodiment emerging concurrently. Drawing on contemporary gender, queer, and critical race theory, this chapter traces the philosophical lineage of Plato's *chora* and Sara Ahmed's theory of racialized extension as foundations for understanding

the materiality of medieval spiritual media. An analysis of Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* explores how these extended bodies not only reify ideologies of gender and race but rely on their cultural meanings, from the hybrid body of mother and nursing child that serves as a figure of Marian and narrative mediation in the *Prioress's Prologue*, to the ways Jewish bodies are made to mediate Christian meanings in the *Tale*.

Finally, Chapter 6, "Making an End: Immediacy and Pastoral Mediation," examines the problem of immediacy within a later medieval Christian context that creates structures of soteriological media even as it represents salvation as immediate. Because media bind to and shape meanings, they persist as a residue that even a turn toward immediacy cannot erase. I argue that although the governing document of pastoral mediation, the canons of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), sets up sharp boundaries between inclusion, salvation, purity, and whiteness on the one hand and exclusion, sin, pollution, and blackness on the other, the necessity of mediators to both secular and sacred immediacy creates the possibility of category contamination. Read along the lines of orthodoxy, such contamination is a threat, but it also reveals how mediation can offer a different kind of eternal life in its chain of remediations. Drawing on modern theories of immediacy alongside premodern critical race theory, I demonstrate that it is only these racialized exclusions that can support the fiction of immediacy. This chapter further argues that the *Canterbury Tales'* closing sequence, fragments 8–10, forms an extended exploration of the fiction of aesthetic and devotional immediacy that requires mediating bodies for its realization. Comprising the *Second Nun's Tale*, *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, *Manciple's Tale*, *Parson's Tale*, and *Retraction*, the sequence demonstrates that to "make an ende" only inaugurates a chain of remediations. The structures of penance in the *Parson's Tale*, in particular, transform the very media of the tales—voices and bodies—into instruments of a "universal" redemption that entrenches racialization. Even as the *Tale* closes with an image of a perfect heavenly community of purified bodies, the requisite mediations of both Christ and the Parson in achieving this community require the exclusion of certain irredeemable bodies.

Premodern media theory, while not developed with respect to the transmission of aesthetic content, nonetheless proves to be a flexible and extensible set of tools for understanding medieval literary aesthetics. Mediation is a central concept for how medieval people experience the practices of their daily life across multiple domains: sensory, ecological, technocultural, administrative, devotional. The human body, although the primary medium

in all of these domains, is less an autonomous black box than a node in a network. While much medieval literature implicitly engages with media concepts, Chaucer's works thematize them. The *House of Fame* and the *Canterbury Tales* explore how the prosthetic and ambient media of the material world create a state of betweenness that constitutes medieval literature. Just as sense perception, bureaucratic administration, and spiritual grace require mediation, so too does literature take form and travel through premodern media. What Kittredge called the "infinite variety" of the *Canterbury Tales* results not so much from its "variety of persons," but rather from the variety of the premodern media ecology. Literature emerges, in Chaucer's poetry, as that which shapes and is shaped by the bodies, elements, instruments, and materials with which it communicates.

