

International Conference
29-30 September 2017

**The Shape of Return
Progress, Process, and Repetition in Medieval Culture**

ICI Berlin

Organized by
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Keynote speaker
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Call for Papers

In his *Convivio*, Dante claims that ‘the supreme desire of each thing, and the one that is first given to it by nature, is to return to its first cause.’ Yet this formulation is marked by a tension: return is both a destination and a process. To put it in terms of an Augustinian distinction: does each thing simply desire to arrive in/at its *patria* (homeland, destination, telos), or is its desire also directed towards the *via* (way, process, journey)? On the one hand, the desire for return is teleological and singular; on the other, it is meandering, self-prolonging, perhaps even non-progressive. And return itself can also be errant, even when successful: to take one important example, medieval theology frequently conceptualizes the sins of heresy and sodomy as self-generating returns to unproductive sites of pleasure or obstinacy.

Return, then, is an uncanny thing, with a distinctive temporality that conjoins recollection, satisfaction, and frustration. It plays an important role in shaping many kinds of medieval cultural artifact. Return is a basic component of pseudo-Dionysian (and later, Thomistic) theories of intellection; for Boethius, it is inherent to the process of spiritual transcendence. Return also shapes literary texts: for instance, romance heroes desire to return to their homeland, but the obstacles placed in their path, or the digressions they undertake, are the basic preconditions of the stories in which they find themselves. In such cases, only a deferred return can satisfy; and even a return is not inevitably satisfying — it can also be a frustrating repetition of a well-trodden path. This is true of lyric texts as much as narrative ones: medieval lyric poems are often concerned with the human inclination to go back to an unfruitful site of pain, loss, or even dangerous enjoyment.

Return is also embedded in the very texture of medieval poetic and musical forms: the *sestina*, the refrain, and the *terza rima* all embody different kinds of recursivity. Dante’s re-use of rhyme sounds in the unfolding of the *Divine Comedy* — a poem that, at various crucial points, thematizes return as a transcendent symbol — performs a spiraling movement that combines repetition and progressive ascent.

Reiteration can disrupt linear and teleological progress, but also empower it. How does medieval culture cope with this ambivalence?

The conference will explore the ways in which medieval literary, artistic, musical, philosophical, and theological texts perform, interrogate, and generate value from the complexities of return, with particular reference to its formal and temporal qualities. Reconsidering the practical and theoretical implications of return — a movement in time and space that seems to shape medieval culture in a fundamental sense — we will investigate the following questions:

- What shapes does return take, and how does it shape cultural artifacts of the Middle Ages?
- How does return (as fact or possibility) regulate the flow of time and the experience of human life?
- How can return as a final goal and return as a problematic repetition coexist?
- Is repetition simply identified with a state of sin, or can it lead somewhere?

The conference will provide a forum for an interdisciplinary discussion of medieval temporality: we welcome participants working in any academic discipline. Areas of investigation might include:

- Neoplatonic emanation and return to the self / God; the temporality and shape of religious self-perfection
- Refrain and/or repetition in musical and literary forms such as lyric, lyric collections or narrative verse incorporating refrains or concatenation
- Ulyssean return in romance, theology, hagiography; return as resolution and/or disruption
- The processes of return inherent in the use and experience of literary *topoi* and *loci classici*; exegetical return; the tension between innovation and tradition in biblical commentary
- Religious conversion as return: teleology, retrospection, spatial metaphors
- Return as related to medieval conceptions of originality and reproduction
- The experience of return in daily life: liturgy, ritual, diurnal and seasonal cycles, the mechanical clock
- Return in medieval temporal theory: for example, the medieval reception of circular time in Stoic philosophy or the book of Ecclesiastes
- The geometry of return in (for instance) mystical writing
- The queerness and/or conservatism of return
- Return from digression; return as a regulatory mechanism
- Return theorized as a constitutive process of subjectivity and/or intellection
- Return as a psychoanalytic concept related to obsession, repression, *Nachträglichkeit*

Papers will be given in English, and will be limited to 30 minutes. Please email an abstract of no more than 300 words and a short bio-bibliographical profile (100 words maximum) to theshapeofreturn@ici-berlin.org by 15 April 2017. An answer will be given before 1 May 2017. A full programme will be published on the ICI Berlin website (www.ici-berlin.org) in due course. As with all events at the ICI Berlin, there is no registration fee. We can provide assistance in securing discounted accommodation for the conference period.