

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

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 is not inevitably satisfying, even when accomplished— 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.

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International Conference

29-30 September 2017, ICI Berlin, in English



The Shape of Return

Progress, Process, and Repetition in Medieval Culture

Organized by Francesco Giusti and Daniel Reeve

Programme

29 SEPTEMBER 2017

10:00 – 10:30 Registration and coffee

10:30 – 11:00 Opening remarks

11:30 – 13:30 **Panel I**

Meghan Quinlan (UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD)

Musical Repetition, Rebirth, and Gautier de Coinci's Return to God

Almut Suerbaum (UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD)

'In time, out of time': Refrain Structures in Mystical Songs

Myrtha de Meo-Ehlert (LUDWIG-MAXIMILIANS-UNIVERSITÄT / UNIVERSITÀ DEL SALENTO)

Intellectual and Superintellectual Knowledge of God: Mystical Union and Emanation in the Tradition of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite

13:00 – 14:30 Lunch

14:30 – 16:30 **Panel II**

Monika Otter (DARTMOUTH COLLEGE)

Return, Repetition and Mental Health in the *Vita Merlini* and the Oxford *Folie Tristan*

Marco Nievergelt (UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK)

Repetition, Process, Progress: The Case for a Reiterative Poetics, from the *Roman de la Rose* to *Piers Plowman*

Jeremy Thompson (HERZOG AUGUST BIBLIOTHEK, WOLFENBÜTTEL)

Concerning the Spiritual Interpretation of Clocks in the Middle Ages

16:30 – 17:00 Coffee break

17:00 – 19:00 **Panel III**

Mikhail Lopatin (UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD)

Tornando indietro: 'Return' as a Musico-Metapoetic Motif in the Trecento Madrigal

Manuele Gragnolati (UNIVERSITÉ PARIS-SORBONNE / ICI BERLIN)

and **Francesca Southerden** (UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD)

Reiterating Desire in Petrarch's *RVF* 70 and 23

19:30 **Keynote**

Elizabeth Eva Leach (UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD)

The Return of Sound and the Music of Return

30 SEPTEMBER 2017

10:30 – 13:00 **Panel IV**

Shoshana Adler (UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA)

'His Owen Marches': Ethnography, Racialization, and Return in the *Book of Marvels and Travels*

Giulia Maria Chesi (HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN)

Women, God(s) and Return in *Odyssey 6* and Arnaut Daniel's 'Doutz braitz e critz'

David Bowe (UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD)

Cavalcanti's Non/Bodily Return: 'Perch'io no spero di tornar giammai'

13:00 – 14:30 Lunch

14:30 – 16:30 **Panel V**

Eran Viesel (BEN-GURION UNIVERSITY OF THE NEGEV)

Exegetical Return: Innovation and Repetition in Jewish Medieval Biblical Commentary

Federico Dal Bo (UNIVERSITAT AUTÒNOMA DE BARCELONA)

Between Repetition and Innovation: A Covert Philosophy of History in Jewish Medieval Commentaries on the Talmud

Annalisa Verza (UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA)

Cyclical Recurrences in Ibn Khaldun's View of History

16:30 – 17:00 Coffee break

17:00 – 19:00 **Panel VI**

Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl (UNIVERSITÄT GRAZ)

Nostalgia and Return in the Old Russian *Song of Igor's Campaign*

Lindsey Drury (FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN)

Passing Times, Pastimes and Past Times in Two Arrested Dances in *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and *Tramutatione Metallica Sogni Tre*

Jennifer Rushworth (UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON)

Barthes's Return to Dante: Spiralizing the Middle Ages

19:30

Keynote

Suzanne Conklin Akbari (UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO)

Binary Time: Repetition and Cycle in Medieval Universal Histories