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Daniel Hobbins, *Authorship and Publicity Before Print: Jean Gerson and the Transformation of Late Medieval Learning*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. xii + 335 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4155-6.

Review by Michael Randall, Brandeis University.

Daniel Hobbins's *Authorship and Publicity Before Print: Jean Gerson and the Transformation of Late Medieval Learning* does a remarkable job bringing to life the writing career of one of the most important, yet frequently ignored, figures in late medieval life. This is particularly noteworthy since the career of Jean Gerson was complex. He was, among many other things, the chancellor of the University of Paris, one of the chief participants at the Council of Constance, and defender of Joan Arc, as well as being one of the most important theologians of the late Middle Ages. As Hobbins remarks, the task of describing Gerson's career is particularly difficult due to the inappropriateness of the categories most often used to describe his intellectual output. A book about a complex man writing in an often misunderstood time could not help but cover a lot of ground. Hobbins's book does just this and does it very well.

The most vexing issue that comes up when writing about French intellectuals in the fifteenth century is one of categorization. Are writers like Gerson the last of the schoolmen or the first of the humanists? Hobbins quite rightly decides to situate Gerson as both schoolman *tardif* and proto-humanist. This categorical diversity makes for a multifaceted portrait. At one moment, for example, Hobbins describes Gerson as a schoolman immediately after he has described how Gerson had reacted against the dialectical excesses of the schoolmen. (p. 163). At another, he is described as being representative of the humanists at almost the same time that Hobbins explains that he possessed traits that are diametrically opposed to those of the humanists (p. 81). However, the problem is more one of modern classification than analytical confusion, and the reader of Hobbins's book has no trouble understanding how one person could contain so many seemingly contradictory attributes. In fact, a major achievement of Hobbins's book is to define Gerson according to a new and more useful category.

Hobbins's chief argument is that Gerson, more than a schoolman or a humanist, was primarily a bookman who understood himself and his work from the viewpoint of a highly self-conscious author. Unlike theologians from the thirteenth century who had written commentaries about set theological pieces, Gerson and other theologians of the fifteenth century wrote tracts and treatises on specific problems and questions. And, unlike his thirteenth-century predecessors, Gerson, as an author mindful of his literary production, took care to promote and to publish his works. Hobbins uses this literary and authorial consciousness to associate Gerson with earlier humanists such as Petrarch, and later ones such as Erasmus. Although Gerson did not promote himself as a "man of letters" to the extent that Erasmus would, he did go to great lengths to ensure that his writings were disseminated as greatly as possible.[1] The ways that Gerson's manuscript writings were spread throughout western and central Europe provide the material for some of the most intriguing elements in Hobbins's book.

An extensive and thoughtful study of the manuscript tradition provides the foundation on which Hobbins's study resides. It is likely that most modern scholars interested in Gerson would avail themselves primarily of the critical edition, the *Œuvres complètes*, published by P. Glorieux between 1960

and 1973, the eighteenth-century *Opera omnia* by L.E. Du Pin (1706), or the critical editions of individual works such as the *De Mystica theologia* published by André Combes (1958). As Hobbins points out, and as any reader of the Glorieux edition will also have noticed, the organizational principle of the *Œuvres complètes* is somewhat wobbly. Hobbins, although depending on the Glorieux edition for many of his citations, has undertaken a massive investigation of the manuscript versions of Gerson's writings.

This study of the manuscripts provides the basis for two different but related strengths of Hobbins's study. First, it allows him to make more precise interpretations of Gerson's texts. Hobbins notes, for example, that in Glorieux's edition a letter Gerson wrote to the College of Navarre on 29 April 1400 has the chancellor recommending texts on the *Sentences* by Bonaventure, Aquinas and Durandus. However, Hobbins notes that two other manuscripts, which Glorieux ignored, eliminate Aquinas from the list (p. 38, and especially note 126, p. 238). He points out that one of earliest manuscripts has Gerson, following Henry of Ghent, adding that Saint Thomas excels especially in the *Secunda-Secundae* (p. 38). Hobbins remarks that it is important to note that Gerson does not recommend the entire *Summa*, as it would seem to be the case in Glorieux's edition, but only that part in which Aquinas treats moral theology (p. 38). Although small, changes in the text such as these, especially if they are due to the hand of the author himself, as Hobbins posits might be the case (p. 38), can go far in explaining the sometimes complex attitude of fifteenth-century authors like Gerson regarding major authorities such as Aquinas. The most noteworthy result, in my mind, of Hobbins's study of the manuscripts is found in chapter seven. In this chapter, Hobbins analyzes three different networks that distributed Gerson's manuscripts to the far corners of western and central Europe. The first distribution circle had its center at the Council of Constance where Gerson played such a key role. Hobbins shows how Gerson used the council as a venue to have his works "pronounced," copied, and then distributed throughout central Europe. He convincingly demonstrates how Gerson's success in German-speaking countries was largely the result of his efforts at Constance. The Council "secured him an international readership during his lifetime in places his works would otherwise have reached only after many years." (p. 196).

Carthusian and Celestine monasteries also provided significant distribution networks as did the Council of Basel. The maps and statistics used throughout this chapter provide a very logical and convincing explanation of what otherwise would seem an anomalous circulation of manuscripts by a most French writer in the German-speaking monastic world. How monasteries in places such as Aggsbach, Cologne, and Melk ended up with such a large number of manuscript versions of Gerson's works provides the material for some of the most interesting passages in the book. It is only through a painstaking and careful analysis of the texts that these distribution networks can be seen and understood.

This attention to manuscripts also allows Hobbins to bring to light another difference between Gerson and his thirteenth-century predecessors. The works of writers from the thirteenth century, especially longer ones such as commentaries on the *Sentences*, were often circulated in excerpts. (p. 206). Gerson, very differently, took great pains to compile his works and transmit them to posterity in collections. Perhaps just as importantly, many readers also took upon themselves the task of compiling his works (p. 208). By looking at the production of the manuscripts themselves, Hobbins is able to focus attention on the degree to which Gerson and his readers were aware that the different works were the result of a single writer's authorial control. Earlier excerpted works and florilegia had dispersed that authorial identity throughout the disparate manuscripts. Gerson and his contemporaries represented a new understanding of authorship. The fact that Gerson's compilations were often awkward attests to the newness of this sentiment (see comments on Gerson's centiloquies on pp. 86-87). A truly authorial identity would only be possible with a more stable publishing apparatus at the end of the sixteenth century.

The question of publication brings up one of the most controversial aspects of Hobbins's book. Distinguishing himself from the historian Elizabeth Eisenstein and the literary critic Stephen Nichols, who cast doubt on whether one could speak of the term "publication" in relation to medieval texts

because of its “strongly marked semantic associations with the lexicon of printing” (p. 153), Hobbins holds that ancient and medieval authors, no less than modern writers, published their texts, both orally and in writing (p. 153). Hobbins explains that the very notion of publishing is pre-modern (p. 153). He writes that “the delivery of a text with the authorization to make copies and to circulate them is the one and only necessary ingredient to the many kinds of publication,” (p. 154). Three different moments mark and can be used to understand the process. The first category of publication is comprised of the initial delivery of the text; the second category covers the author’s correction and/or revision of a text already in circulation; the third category allows for the participation of bookmakers (scribes, illuminators, and so on) and readers making changes to texts (p. 156).

In some ways, Hobbins’s book is quite Gersonian itself. Instead of being a commentary on a late medieval text, Hobbins’s book is a treatise on late medieval textual production and Gerson’s part in that process. Hobbins makes a powerful and convincing argument regarding Gerson’s public persona. As already mentioned, instead of writing commentaries as did many thirteenth-century theologians, theologians of the fifteenth century like Gerson wrote tracts which often addressed a specific issue that was not limited to the strictly university world the authors of commentaries had addressed. Gerson jumped into the public arena in treatises such as those on Joan of Arc and the *Romance of the Rose*. The public nature of much of Gerson’s writing led inevitably to a problem inherent in many works about current events: The speed at which they were written often made them unwieldy and often difficult to understand for the modern reader. This is one of the reasons, Hobbins explains, that Gerson never managed to write the great literary or theological work that would have secured him lasting fame.

It is possible, of course, to differ with Hobbins about the meaning or import of a treatise, or regarding the possible theological or philosophical tradition to which Gerson might have belonged. By emphasizing how the different texts were produced, some of the deeper theological issues Gerson was dealing with in the texts themselves were occasionally glossed over. However, given the vibrant picture that results from Hobbins’s detailed analysis of Gerson the bookman, it would be churlish and foolish to wish that he had spent more time on a deeper analysis of any texts.

Even if a reader does disagree with Hobbins regarding the meaning of a specific text or about the general importance of Gerson in late medieval history, it will be evident to even the most critical reader that this is a truly impressive book that changes Gerson studies as we know them. It is grounded in a thorough reading of Gerson’s manuscripts and provides a new and powerful argument about the role of the writer in the era just before the birth of printing. Hobbins creates a clear picture of Gerson as a highly self-conscious writer and of the social and culture milieux in which he produced his works. The scholarship is impeccable and the notes provide as interesting a read as the text itself. Hobbins has learned much from established Gerson scholars such as Gilbert Ouy and Matteo G. Roccati, but he is not afraid to state explicitly when he finds the categorizations regarding “schoolmen” and “humanists” of other scholars lacking, as found in his allusions to earlier historians Anthony Grafton, Walter Ong, and Elizabeth Eisenstein, and modern theorist Jürgen Habermas show. Hobbins’s book will be counted as a major contribution to the field of late-medieval European studies. Gerson emerges from this study in clearer focus and our modern vision of late medieval culture considerably sharper.

## NOTES

[1] See Lisa Jardine *Erasmus, Man of Letters: The Construction of Charisma in Print* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

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