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REMEMBERING SIMON GAUNT (1959–2021)



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The world of medieval literary studies was rocked by the sudden death of Professor Simon Gaunt on 4th December 2021. The tributes that appeared in the wake of this unwelcome news speak eloquently to Simon's pre-eminence in the field of medieval French literary and linguistic studies. Conversations with friends have featured descriptions such as 'a real leader', 'a force of nature', and 'outrageous', which will convey some sense of the impression he made both professionally and personally on so many. The present obituary, co-written by Tom Hinton and Karen Pratt, pays homage to Simon as a scholar, teacher, and friend.

TOM HINTON, SENIOR LECTURER IN FRENCH
(UNIVERSITY OF EXETER), WRITES:

Simon was born in London in 1959, and despite subsequent moves around the UK it was perhaps inevitable he would go on to spend most of his professional life back in the city he so loved. He completed his undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in French at Warwick University, gaining his doctorate under the supervision of Linda Paterson in 1986. His doctoral work was published in his first monograph, *Troubadours and Irony* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989). He moved to Cambridge in 1986, initially as a Research Fellow at Downing College, and then becoming an Official Fellow of St Catharine's College and University Lecturer from 1988. During this period he established a formidable partnership with Sarah Kay. This bore material fruit in the co-edited volume *Troubadours: An Introduction* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), an indispensable resource for teaching Occitan lyric – I use it extensively in my own final-year UG module. It was soon followed by the useful short monograph *Retelling the Tale: An Introduction to Medieval French Literature* (London: Duckworth, 2001). Both volumes are characterised by a combination of accessibility for the beginner and food for thought for more advanced readers. Simon and Sarah would later reprise their co-editing endeavours to bring together another high-quality collection aimed at students but rich with insights: the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008). Alongside *Troubadours: An Introduction* and a slew of important articles, a further magisterial contribution to Occitan Studies came in the form of *Marcabru: A Critical Edition* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), the definitive edition of this important and prolific poet's works, produced in collaboration with Ruth Harvey and Linda Paterson. The joint nature of many of these projects demonstrates Simon's career-long recognition of the benefits of exchange and dialogue with fellow scholars, as well as his intellectual and collegial generosity of spirit.

Written while he was at Cambridge, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) is possibly Simon's most widely influential monograph. It offers a compelling examination of how gender is configured across – and contributes to defining – five textual

genres: epic, romance, lyric, hagiography and *fabliau*. *Gender and Genre* exemplifies Simon's desire to bring medieval texts into conversation with modern theory in order to unearth fresh perspectives, a trait that was a mainstay of his scholarship. As he argues in the introduction, 'each generation of medievalists must ask new questions, the point being not simply to find out about the past, but to dialogue with it. Who can conduct a dialogue with someone else's questions?'¹ Additionally, it was his strong conviction that the survival and flourishing of the discipline required scholars of medieval French to engage in interdisciplinary and cross-period exchanges with colleagues in other disciplines and periods. The range and quality of work currently being produced in the field can partly be ascribed to Simon's research leadership, both by the example he set in his own publications and more directly through the support and guidance he offered so many.

In 1998, Simon moved to a Professorship at King's College London, where he remained until his death, narrowly missing out on the reward of retirement. Here he continued to produce his own ground-breaking research and to nurture the next generation of scholars; I had the good fortune of being one of his doctoral students from 2006-2010. It was an exciting intellectual environment, with Simon a vocal presence at our medieval reading group, where the most exciting new approaches to medieval literature were discussed. Simon's interests always combined theoretical ambition and sophistication with philological and codicological rigour; a favourite question of his at research seminars was to ask the visiting speaker to say more about the manuscripts of whichever text was under consideration. This awareness of the significance of codicological context for the interpretation of medieval texts is visible in many of his works, including 'Discourse Desired: Desire, Subjectivity and *Mouvance* in *Can vei la lauzeta mover*' (in *Desiring Discourse: The Literature of Love, Ovid through Chaucer*, ed. James J. Paxson and Cynthia A. Gravlee (Selinsgrove: Sequehanna University Press, 1998, pp. 89-110) and more recently the *Medieval French Literary Culture Outside France* project (MFLCOF) that he co-led with Jane Gilbert and Bill Burgwinkle between 2011 and 2015, which took as its analytic focus not individual texts in the traditional sense

1 Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p. 19.

but ‘textual traditions’: ‘clusters of related works, varying internally as well as in their external circumstances’.²

Simon’s appreciation of the instability of medieval textual culture went hand in hand with his interest in the slipperiness of language. Among multiple theoretical lenses he explored throughout his career, Lacan and Derrida were natural interlocutors, whose works helped him to get to grips with the ambiguities and unacknowledged tensions of texts. His next book, *Martyrs to Love: Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), was perhaps the most developed statement of this strand of his research, offering brilliant analyses of the symbolic value of love’s recurring association with sacrifice and death in French and Occitan texts about love; as in earlier work, Lancelot and the troubadours feature heavily. He concludes that this model of sacrificial desire, with its focus on producing an ethics of love, was decisive for the evolution of Western European thinking about love. As in his earlier books, he points to the ways in which normative discourses might be exposed or challenged from within the texts; and he makes suggestive parallels between the preoccupations of modern theory and medieval literature (with the difference that the latter tends to explore these paradigms with more irony and self-awareness than the former).

The final phase of Simon’s research career saw him again at the cutting edge of scholarship, engaging with postcolonial concerns about the revision of linguistic and literary canons and the relationship between language and place. The first iteration of this centred on Marco Polo’s *Le Devisement du Monde*, the writing of cultural difference, and the significance of French as its original language of composition. He pursued these investigations across several articles and a final monograph, *Marco Polo’s Le Devisement du Monde: Narrative Voice, Language and Diversity* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013). The concern for unpicking and problematizing ‘French’ literature and language, which he had broached in this book, became the central focus of Simon’s later-career work. The collaborative instincts that he had shown throughout his career were given full rein here, as he became an early adopter of the potential that large-scale grants held for cooperation between Humanities scholars. The

2 <<http://www.medievalfrancophone.ac.uk/about-the-project/project-rationale/textual-traditions-and-segmentation/>> [last consulted 7th Jan 2022].

mentioned MFLCOF project, supported by an AHRC grant, was followed by the ERC-funded *The Values of French Language and Literature in the European Middle Ages* (TVOF), which ran from 2015 to 2020. He also co-authored a translation of the Oxford *Roland* with his fellow KCL French medievalist Karen Pratt for the Oxford World's Classics series (Oxford: OUP, 2016). The inclusion of English versions of *Daurel et Beton* and *Le Voyage de Charlemagne* in an affordable volume has made these less well-known texts accessible to non-specialist Anglophone audiences for the first time.

Both of Simon's grant-funded projects resulted in web-based outputs that will constitute invaluable resources for scholars in the open-access era. For MFLCOF, this is a database available at <https://medievalfrancophone.ac.uk>, tracking the geographical dissemination of six textual traditions: the *Prose Lancelot* and *Prose Tristan*, *Guiron le Courtois*, the *Roman d'Alexandre*, Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie*, and the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*. In addition, MFLCOF has spawned a book co-written with Gilbert and Burginkle, *Medieval French Literary Culture Abroad* (Oxford: OUP, 2020), a welcome contribution to current vibrant debates about the cultural uses of French across the medieval world and the redefinition of literary history. TVOF focused its investigation of French's role as a European language through the *Histoire ancienne*, offering digital editions of two manuscripts of the hitherto-unedited text (<https://tvof.ac.uk>). Excitingly, these editions are lemmatised (a process that links each instance of a word to the corresponding lemma in the *DEAF*) which facilitates text-searching and linguistic study. In many ways this final project encapsulated several of Simon's scholarly concerns: the importance of reading texts in manuscript, the benefits of collaborative working, and the problematic nature of borders (textual, generic, linguistic, or political). Furthermore, the innovative use of Digital Humanities in both MFLCOF and TVOF makes these projects important in themselves beyond the valuable outputs they have produced; they will stand as models for future DH-facing work on medieval language and literature.

The preceding paragraphs have borne repeated witness to Simon's collegiality and deep concern for the health of his profession. A further manifestation of this was his active presence in scholarly societies, including the ICLS. As a July baby, he would often bemoan spending

his birthday at conferences; and yet there he was, offering thoughtful questions or insightful advice after a paper, making trenchant suggestions at AGMs, and catching up with friends. It was a privilege to have him give a keynote at the 2019 Triennial ICLS Conference in Exeter, which I co-organised with my colleagues Emma Cayley and Michelle Bolduc. Those who attended will no doubt recall both the sophistication of his argument and the bold colours of his shirt. (A memory resurfaces of a sartorial discussion at one conference in 2015, where Simon had asked me rhetorically: ‘When have you ever seen me in a shirt and tie?’ Certainly, even on the few occasions he was to be found in formal attire, said outfits were invariably and emphatically vibrant.) Simon’s service to the academic community won him official recognition from multiple organisations. He was made a Fellow of King’s College London in 2015; an Honorary Fellow of St Catharine’s College in 2016; and was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2018, leaving the new fellows’ dinner as early as possible to join friends at a drag show in Soho; somehow the anecdote bears an appropriately Simon-like combination of gravitas and irreverence.

Simon was an inspiring mentor and friend, an insightful reader and a reassuring presence, someone to whom one could always turn for guidance. He was also a tremendous tease with an infectious zest for life, as eager to share his thoughts on my music listening choices and honeymoon destination as on more academic concerns. Among so many other things, he taught me that the supervisor-supervisee relationship does not end upon the award of a doctorate. I miss him hugely, but he will remain a scholarly and professional inspiration for the rest of my career.

KAREN PRATT, PROFESSOR EMERITA OF MEDIEVAL FRENCH
LITERATURE (KING’S COLLEGE LONDON), WRITES:

Simon Gaunt was not only a world-renowned medievalist, he was a very dear friend and colleague. On his arrival as Head of Department and Professor of French Language and Literature at King’s College

London he totally modernised the French Department, making sure that quite senior colleagues got the promotions they deserved. He introduced more team teaching and thematic courses into the syllabus, thus assuring the survival of Medieval French studies within wider, sometimes theoretical, contexts. I will always be grateful to him for having preserved and developed the subject long enough for me to end my career as a French medievalist when colleagues in other university departments had forfeited the privilege of teaching their specialism.

He was also extremely active in the Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, inviting numerous world-renowned scholars to speak, and he was influential in many of the medieval appointments made within the School of Humanities. He was not only Head of the French Department but also Dean of the Faculty, representing medieval studies at the highest level, and frequently involved in the REF exercise, which meant he was so well informed about recent developments in the discipline.

Simon always led from the front and refused the professorial privilege of specialising only in doctoral supervision and final-year teaching. He taught the French language to first years and enjoyed introducing them to medieval literature. He was an inspiring teacher, who was adored by his students and much respected by his colleagues. His international reputation brought many graduate students to the Department; several of his PhD students now hold academic posts and none can believe that they have lost their ever supportive, stimulating mentor.

Simon was always supportive of my career, even if we did not always have the same approach to medieval French literature. Our partnership culminated in our translation of the *Roland*, which we felt reflected the best of our complementary talents. This complementarity even extended to our work rhythms: Simon had always done a day's work by 9 AM, just when I was ready to open our joint Dropbox file.

I shall always remember that eager graduate student in a red jumper at the first conference where we met, who matured into a brilliant international scholar and colleague, full of exciting new ideas. I never expected to outlive him. He was a good friend to so many people, and thankfully enjoyed his relatively short life to the full: opera, good food, travel, medieval texts and manuscripts. He

appreciated the stimulation of international conferences, but was just as keen to skinny-dip in Vancouver and listen to fado in Lisbon. He will be missed by so many.

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