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Preface

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PREFACE

The last fifteen years have seen an unprecedented surge of interest in law and literature, particularly in medieval and early modern treatments. Despite this considerable interest, there exists no convenient introduction to this topic. Ever since the publication of Richard Firth Green's seminal study, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and the Law in Ricardian England* (1999), the law has been recognised as central to the field of medieval English literature, not least because many leading late medieval writers were themselves trained in the law. Virtually all canonical writers of the period such as Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, William Langland, Thomas Hoccleve, John Lydgate, John Skelton, Thomas Wyatt and John Rastell engage with the law and legal forms in their texts, yet the arcane nature of much medieval and early modern law restricts access to specialists. Illuminating the connections between law and literature in late medieval England requires the reader to be familiar with the esoteric world of early English legal systems and to recognise the open-ended routes Middle English literary texts make through that legal world.

The challenges of late medieval English scholarship are familiar enough; those with the study of the contemporaneous legal system are less so. For instance, dealing with late medieval English courts means understanding, at least, three systems (ecclesiastical, royal and manorial) and three traditions (canon, civil and common law) whose interconnections remain understudied. It also means reading primary texts in three languages – Latin, Anglo-Norman (eventually known as Law French) and Middle English. And, most frustratingly, it means coming to grips with immense gaps in the documentary record (due to fires in the Inns of Court in the early fifteenth century) by working forward from the early thirteenth century and back from the mid-fifteenth century.

The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Law and Literature addresses the need for an authoritative guide through the bewildering maze

of late medieval law as well as the need for concise examples of how the law infiltrated contemporaneous literary texts. The *Companion* combines accessible chapters written by leading specialists in legal history with chapters exploring literary conversations with the law in the works of later medieval authors. Most of the literary chapters will cluster authors and texts by topics and genres; however, three chapters each focus exclusively on a canonical author: Langland, Chaucer and Gower. Our choice of the later medieval period captures not only the richness of literary uses of legal material, but also reflects the teaching curricula of many university programmes.

Our organising principle for this *Companion* addresses the need for detailed introductions to legal concepts, practices and institutions in post-Conquest England geared for literary scholars. Thus, Part I, 'Legal Contexts', provides a series of chapters that bring together recent scholarship on the most pertinent aspects of legal history: 'English Law before the Conquest', 'Languages and Law', 'Canon and Civil Law', 'Custom and Common Law', 'Magna Carta and Statutory Law' and, finally, 'Treatises, Tracts and Compilations'. Each of these chapters covers a broad field and assumes no prior knowledge of English legal history. Although our literary focus is the vibrant Middle English period, the legal background chapters in Part I also draw on much of the post-Conquest period to provide readers with a historical understanding of some of England's legal institutions. Where relevant, these chapters will also refer to pre-Conquest Anglo-Saxon institutions and traditions such as the *Leges Edwardi Confessoris*, royal charters, and continuities in ecclesiastical traditions.

Part II, 'Literary Texts', contains chapters on ten families of texts and authors from across the later medieval period whose verse and prose can be understood as engaging with legal discourse at several points of contact: 'Treason', 'Complaint Literature', 'Political Literature and Political Law', 'William Langland', 'Geoffrey Chaucer', 'John Gower', 'Lollards and Religious Writings', 'Lancastrian Literature', 'Middle English Romance and Malory's *Morte Darthur*' and 'Marriage and the Legal Culture of Witnessing'. These chapters refer to and employ the legal terms and concepts introduced in Part I. In this way, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Law and Literature* forms the basis for students wishing to explore this rich area or for scholars to familiarise themselves with literary uses of the law.

Linda Bree at Cambridge University Press supported our project from its very inception, and we wish to express our sincere gratitude to her. We would also like to thank our contributors for their authoritative and

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finely crafted chapters and for their patience with our interventions during the copy-editing process. Work on this *Companion* has been a pleasure, and we hope that our book will guide students and researchers through the bewildering maze of early English law and assist them in opening up the rich treasures still locked away in the field of medieval law and literature.

Candace Barrington and Sebastian Sobecki

