



CALL FOR PAPERS
"Debt and Indebtedness in Medieval Texts."
Nantes University, 29 April 2016

Organiser : Agnès Blandeau, Senior Lecturer in English (Medieval Studies) at Nantes University (CRINI).

Medieval texts are sometimes described as outgrowths of pre-existing sources, to which they are indebted for what they borrow, translate or transform. Literary indebtedness certainly is one of the key features of textual production in the Middle Ages. Middle English Breton lays like *Lay Le Freine* or *Sir Launfal* are a case in point among others. One other aspect of the medieval context is the development in the Christian western world from the 13th century onwards of a flourishing economic system. The economic expansion concurrent with the urban growth has a decisive impact on the Christian outlook on money and business contracts (see Pierre Jean de Olivi, *Tractatus de Contractibus*, written at the end of the 13th century). Paradoxically in an increasingly commercial and financial landscape/mindscape, the mendicant orders appeal to apostolic deprivation and castigate the lures of riches and possessions. No wonder incurring debt is regarded as an omen of moral ruin, a hindrance to spiritual redemption in the hereafter.

In the early fifteenth-century prose debate about the Decalogue, *Dives and Pauper*, the moneyless preacher draws a black picture of debtors (Vol. I, Part 2, Ninth Precept, Ch. 7, l.16-44). A condemnation of greed and covetousness, this Commandment, as glossed by Pauper instructing the rich layman in scriptural/spiritual matters, broaches the issue of debt. What he underlines at that point of his lengthy demonstration is that greed irremediably leads to debt and shady dealings bound to be punished by the devil: "(...) so that neyther for dred of God ne for schame ne for speche of the world they cesyn nout to borwyn ne to getyn falslyche othir mennys good and so fallyn deppere & deppere in dette til at the laste the fend sleth hem body and soule. And therfor loke that thu paye wel thin dettis whil thu myght (...)" at lines 26-30. The advisory, if not admonitory, tone aims to warn Dives about grasping people's relentless fall. Debt is associated with moral erring and incurable blindness.

In medieval times, debts are despised, along with debtors and those who make a living by lending money, usurers in other words, although paying one's debts is an absolute requirement. Anthropologist David Graeber, in his history of debt (*Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, 2011), reminds us of the binding moral power of this very notion, which actually precedes the invention of money. A promise to pay considered sacred in the biblical sense of a covenant between God and man (like Noah, for instance) or between two persons, a debt implies a link, both financial and moral, that binds the debtor to the creditor who finds himself in a superior position until the debt is honoured, or in some cases until remission of the debt, as in *The Franklin's Tale*: the Orleans clerk eventually writes off Aurelius's debt (1,000 pounds' worth) after the latter has written off Dorigen's.

Medieval texts, either poetry or prose, testify to the significant role played by the notion of indebtedness, which takes on several meanings. In addition to being purely financial, a debt can be of honour, of gratitude, of love, or a debt to the family, the peers, or the community. A



UNIVERSITÉ DE NANTES



debt is also of an intellectual and aesthetic nature, when a medieval “*auctor*” pays tribute to his sources, or not. Illustrations of the various aspects of indebtedness can be found in romances and lays, epics, saints’ lives among other genres.

The conference invites the participants to examine all kinds of medieval texts, whether verse or prose, in English or in other languages, through the filter of the idea of debt and indebtedness.

Please submit an abstract either in English or in French of about 250 words by January 31st 2016 to agnes.blandeau@univ-nantes.fr.