

Summaries and the Limits of Narrative in Medieval Literature

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My talk is situated between the themes of the two panels (4 and 8): I am interested in exploring the forms and functions of summaries (*epitomai*) in medieval literature. Such summaries can be found across a wide range of medieval texts: authors, scribes, or characters provide a brief overview of another text, the content of which (main plot points, bare framework of the action) is recounted in an oftentimes brief manner. Summaries, I argue, are situated between the more formalised text types of commentary and *descriptio* on the one hand and storytelling, on the other, and they can take a range of forms, from lists to more elaborated passages. Such summaries do not, strictly speaking, narrate; they are an abstraction and condensation of an actual narrative. I want to pursue the functions of this liminal text form in medieval literature, focusing on examples from medieval English texts: why can such summaries be useful (and for whom); how do they build a community of readers and/or texts; to what extent do they function like commentaries; what is their place in the wider discursive context of textual production; and to what extent can such summaries help us better understand medieval reading and reception practices? The suppression of narrative development in summaries can shed new light also on other narrative forms of storytelling - e.g. of saints' legends - and their understanding and handling of plot more generally.