Introduction to Hoccleve's Complaint: Transcript

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A man named Thomas makes a complaint. He has been unwell – he tells us that his memory 'went to play' for a while – but now he has recovered. He thanks God for this, but there's still a problem: his friends don't really believe that he is better. They avoid him, and he says that they're whispering behind his back. What can he do? Thomas's complaint is a poignant way of talking about his mental illness, but also of claiming back his own identity, health, voice – his own self – through writing.

This poem is also a 'complaint': a genre well known to Hoccleve's contemporaries. Complaints could air political grievances, lament the state of the world, or moan that the one you love is ghosting you. Hoccleve's Complaint combines vocabulary from the political and moral complaint with the urgency of the personal. The 'Thomas' who speaks this poem is both Thomas Hoccleve, and also a lost soul, a repentant sinner, and someone let down by his friends. The Complaint reminds us that every autobiography is constructed: it's a series of rhetorical claims about the author. This applies all the way from St Augustine's Confessions (c.400 CE) to Dickens's Great Expectations (1860–61), to the latest ghost-written celeb memoir.

Hoccleve was a younger contemporary of the most famous late-medieval English writer, Geoffrey Chaucer (d.1400). He knew Chaucer, praising him in other poems. At the start of this extract, Hoccleve nods to the springtime opening of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, but instead of Chaucer's 'Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote' (When April with his sweet showers), here we have the autumnal 'After that hervest inned had his sheves' (After Harvest had gathered in his sheaves). The world, and with it Hoccleve's heart and mind, is gloomy: 'That chaunge sanke into min herte roote'.

The Complaint describes Thomas's 'thoughtful maladie' (anxious illness) in moving detail. His body and mind are hypersensitive to darkening days and hostile or uncaring crowds in London and Westminster, where Hoccleve worked as a clerk. He's one of the first writers to document the anxiety of urban life, and its threat to your own sense of who you are.

Hoccleve's personal voice, his brilliant range of metaphor, and his ability to mingle the everyday with the ethical or spiritual all make him an exceptional writer. Later in the Complaint, he even goes to a mirror, to practise looking 'normal' so that people will believe he's sane. In the next section of the Series, Hoccleve meets a friend and finally persuades him that he's well enough to write again.

It's unusual to have such a personal text from the medieval period. Hoccleve gives us an insight into his own mental illness and recovery, but also opens this out onto big questions about the self and others. Alongside that, we're always aware that he's constructing an artful text that seeks to persuade us of its value, its truth.