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Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt (review)

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By the end, the term “Sacramental” in Lipton’s title, accurate and justified as it is in Augustinian, doctrinal terms, seems slightly misleading. The emphasis has shifted decisively toward the secular bourgeois. The term “class” might have been adopted more generally than “strata” (especially as there is some uncertainty from the very start about whether to treat that noun as singular or plural). Lipton occasionally gives vent herself to a bourgeois, “middle strata” indignation: she says twice in so many words that in the *Traitié*, “Tristan and Ulysses are revealed to be domestic horrors” (they are certainly not a model of marital manners, it is true); *The Book of Margery Kempe* depicts “marital sex as horribly oppressive and unclean.” But, even if the book does not exactly establish a genre of marriage-related literature from around 1400, it is a model of how texts can be read closely in their context to the benefit of both literary and historical understanding.

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ROBERT J. MEYER-LEE. *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xii, 297. £50.00; \$90.00.

Robert Meyer-Lee’s *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt* explores familiar territory from an unfamiliar perspective. In one sense this is yet another study of the evolution of premodern subjectivity, the development of a personal voice in reaction to, or in concert with, the exercise of institutionalized power. But rather than relying, like most new historicists, on an anachronistic Foucauldian paradigm, Meyer-Lee looks to sober literary history to provide him with a structure for his narrative. The results, while not likely to be uncontentious, are consistently perceptive and stimulating.

Down to the late fourteenth century, says Meyer-Lee, neither named authors (paradigmatically, writers of chronicles and histories) nor anonymous first-person lyricists were expected to project a sense of personal presence in their work. Self-expression was generic, not only in the literary sense (which it can hardly avoid being), but also in the sense that nonpatented drugs are generic—that is, nondiscrete, common to all. All

this changed with the arrival on the scene of the self-fashioning Petrarchan court poet, however. What Meyer-Lee calls “laureate poetics,” by forcing the writer to confront the source of his authority and the nature of his relationship to political power, forced him into a new definition of himself. In fifteenth-century England, he claims, this definition took two principal forms, the sententious self-aggrandizement of John Lydgate and the self-conscious mendicancy of Thomas Hoccleve—the first a court outsider drawn to look to the crown for poetic legitimation, the second an insider forced to beg his very livelihood from the same source. Meyer-Lee shows how the inevitable conflict between glorification and subservience works itself out in the self-fashioning, not only of these two poets, but in their successors, Benedict Burgh and George Ashby. Of course, as he fully recognizes, nothing approaching a fully institutionalized laureateship existed in the English court before Henry VII (and perhaps not even then), and one of the most fascinating sections of the book is the disillusionment Meyer-Lee detects in the three early Tudor writers, Stephen Hawes, Alexander Barclay, and John Skelton, who had finally to come to terms with its unsatisfying actuality. Not the least of this study’s ironies is that laureate poetics seem only to have functioned effectively as long as they were merely notional; the appointment of an actual laureate was to signal their demise. In an interesting coda, Meyer-Lee discusses the apparent turn from laureate poetics exemplified by Sir Thomas Wyatt.

In many ways, *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt* rewrites standard literary history, replacing Geoffrey Chaucer with John Lydgate at the center of the late medieval English literary tradition. While this is not necessarily wrong (later literary history may well diverge from contemporary perceptions—as New Criticism famously did in the case of the metaphysicals, for example), it certainly seems counterintuitive. For most readers, the Chaucerian persona looks far more highly-wrought than its Lydgatean counterpart, despite the fact that Meyer-Lee leads us to believe that Chaucer’s laureate poetics were less evolved. What is really at issue here, though, is not actual self-fashioning as such, but the fashioning of a sense of individuality, and, as Meyer-Lee is quite ready to concede, this is not something that interested Lydgate very much (whether because of his personal inclinations, his monastic vocation, or his laureate aspirations, is of course a moot point). Yet we might argue that it is precisely his evocation of individuality that makes Geoffrey

Chaucer so attractive to later writers (and hence so central to the tradition). It is all very well for Meyer-Lee to conclude that Lydgate “permanently altered [literary] history’s course by putting into place a relationship between poets and power that, even to this day, haunts English poetry’s greatest claims to be something other than mere words” (p. 232), but the best illustration of that course he can come up with is a pompous and prosy sonnet in favor of capital punishment by a valetudinarian William Wordsworth—if this makes him “the most paradigmatic of English Romantics,” give me a Browning monologue any day!

In view of the large claims made by *Poets and Power*, its somewhat selective use of evidence is rather worrying. Given Lydgate’s enormous corpus, some omissions are inevitable (indeed merciful), but surely his *Testament* is particularly relevant here. After all, when he tackles self-fashioning head on, it is to Augustine, not Petrarch, that Lydgate turns. And what of Wyatt’s clever little court satire “Myn owne Iohn Poynz”? And should we not learn more of what was happening on the Continent? The Burgundian court is mentioned, but François Villon (perhaps the most individual voice in all medieval literature) is not; nor are the *rhétoriciens* (perhaps the most stylistically self-conscious). What, indeed, was going on elsewhere in the English literary scene? Was self-fashioning not just as much a feature of the mystical tradition? It would be difficult to think of someone more remote from laureate poetics than Margery Kempe, yet for most readers the sense of a personal presence that she projects is as at least as strong as Thomas Hoccleve’s. Finally, there is a certain reductiveness in all this: particularly in the case of John Skelton, it is somewhat galling to find that this brilliant, if flawed, poet is being judged by Lydgatean standards and found wanting.

I do not wish to end on a negative note. There is a great deal to admire in *Poets and Power*: it is clearly and forcefully written and offers a number of brilliant individual readings of poems by Lydgate and Hoccleve and their successors. Its central thesis is boldly presented, and while it is certainly bracing to be offered such an original taxonomy of late Middle English courtly poetics, readers must ultimately decide for themselves whether it is one that accounts for all the facts.

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