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The Voice of the Hammer: The Meaning of Work in Medieval English Literature (review)

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this function and Microsoft decided that it would no longer continue to upgrade it. Like many but not all Mac users I have Internet Explorer 2 on my machine but I have not used it for some time, and in ten years it is going to be very hard for a Mac person to find and use this program. A decade is a very long time in the computer industry, but librarians and even Old English scholars have to think over a longer time frame. This DVD is copy protected and users are forbidden to copy it by the publisher so the purchaser of the DVD is legally limited to using the physical copy that he or she acquired with the package in which it came.

So the question which the librarian or individual scholar must ask is whether the undoubted merits of this DVD outweigh the potentially short shelf life of this form of a facsimile. At a large research university where there are a number of Old English specialists among the faculty and students, the answer is probably yes, but in most other academic and scholarly contexts, the answer is probably no. Even an individual scholar who has some means will have to think hard about whether to spend the money for this DVD, because while a scholarly library can be a very substantial asset which the scholar can leave to his or her heirs, this DVD is not likely to be of much value in ten or twenty years.

What is particularly annoying about this situation is that other comparable DVDs—even some that Muir has been involved with—are much more reasonably priced. The DVD of *The Junius Manuscript* is currently advertised at one hundred dollars and discounts are probably available. Even one hundred dollars is expensive for a physical object that can be duplicated for pennies, but it less than a fourth of the price that the publishers are asking for the DVD of *The Exeter Book*. One can only hope that there will be a second edition of this DVD which is priced more reasonably—at the least Muir and his publishers should allow owners to reproduce back-up copies for security and allow purchasers to buy revised versions of this DVD adapted for new and changing software requirements for a nominal fee. As matters stand this DVD is simply priced too extravagantly and is too vulnerable to physical decay and the exigencies of software development and change to be a reasonable purchase for anyone but very wealthy Anglo-Saxonists and very well-endowed libraries. For the rest of us it is simply too expensive and too vulnerable to be worth it.

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THE VOICE OF THE HAMMER: THE MEANING OF WORK IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE. By Nicola Masciandaro. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. Pp. xii + 210. \$25 (paper).

The *Voice of the Hammer* should be retitled the *Voice of the Stylus*. From the first paragraph Nicola Masciandaro makes it clear that this “is not labor’s voice as the self-expression of medieval laborers,” rather it is about the literary representation of work in the poetry of late fourteenth-century England, and the role given to work in the construction of the self.

Masciandaro begins the book with an historical agenda. He has chosen this poetry because it was the product of a time in which the regulation of labor had become a major public issue after the plague, and he also wants to challenge a tradition in modern history of nostalgically opposing the medieval and the modern, which suggests that “modern work is separated from the life of the household, or even life itself, [but] medieval work was fused with social and personal experience.”

The problem with this agenda, for an historian, is that Masciandaro takes little account of historical writing on attitudes to labor, or on the relationship between work and the household, and his ideas of both the medieval and the modern are based on slight and outdated bodies of literature. There are passing references to the work of older historians, such as Coulton, Thrupp, Hilton, and Tawney, but no references to many of the staple works on post-plague English labor regulation such as Bertha Putnam, Stephen Penn, Christopher Given-Wilson, or Anthony Musson, or even to the published ordinances of labor or the published records of the justices of labor. Thus he is unaware of debates about the representation of labor in the administrative milieu in which some of his authors also were employed. Similarly Masciandaro grounds the historical tradition of opposing medieval and modern work practices in the ideas of Marx, but has not read more recent historians on this subject. There is no reference to the publications of Caroline Barron, Sandy Bardsley, Judith Bennett, Harold Fox, Jeremy Goldberg, Barbara Hanawalt, Barbara Harvey, Maryanne Kowaleski, Mavis Mate, Lawrence Poos, Felicity Riddy, Stephen Rigby, Phillip Schofield, Heather Swanson, Donald Woodward, or Jane Whittle, to name just a few of the senior scholars who have written about the many diverse and particular forms of medieval work and their variable relationships to practices of householding. Such studies debate at length the function of work in relation to the construction, performance, and perception of gender, age, and status, producing ideas and material that could be essential to Masciandaro's interest in the role of work in the construction of the self. They also unpick the nostalgic view of the medieval household and complicate and challenge the legacy of Marx, not least through their consideration of gender.

Masciandaro's ignorance of this scholarship means that he ignores all issues relating to gender, lifecycle, employment, patronage, service, and hired labor within his conception of work. Masciandaro's view of labor is thus historically extremely generalized. It ignores all variation in relation to time, place, and person. What emerges is a preoccupation with an idea of work relating to the clerical and male literary ego, and both the medieval and modern desire to justify intellectual work as a form of labor appropriate to men. The only woman in the entire book is Chaucer's Second Nun, who appears as an example of desire for an "authorship conventionally unavailable to women," though that "convention" and the work of female authors is explored no further. It is a shame that Masciandaro seems entirely insensitive to this all-pervasive gendering of his project, given the extensive work by literary medievalists on writing and gender with which he could engage, and the work of authors such as D. Vance Smith and Glenn Burger on writing and masculinity in particular.

The first chapter pursues the semantics of work through five words: *travail*, *labour*, *swink*, *werk* and *craft*, building on the work of the *Middle English Dictionary*. Masciandaro misses (or does he deliberately ignore?) the fundamental sexual connotations of postlapsarian labor in a number of the sources he quotes. For example on p. 17: "Ffor the erthe was made of erthe / At the first begynnyng, / That erthe schuld labour the erthe / In trowthe and sore swynkyng." The restriction of the discussion to a small number of Middle English poems also prevents consideration of the multi-lingual context in which these words became "English," since there is no consideration of the terminology used in contemporary accounts of the employment or regulation of labor in French and Latin as well as English. The remainder of the first chapter turns to a discussion of the relationship between vocabulary and culture, and an elaboration on work as a

process and a product. He disproves Ruzena Ostrà's (1967) claim that there was an essential dichotomy in the medieval vocabulary of work between urban and rural labor. Instead he asserts that the vocabulary of work was gradated according to the status attached to different kinds of labor, from hard physical labor, to the mechanical arts and crafts, to the labor of the intellect. Masciandaro then suggests that this traditional discourse became merged into a single category of *werk*, in which all labor embraced a "sense of ethically and historically consequential action." This is an interesting observation, but I was less convinced by his attempts to contrast this broad medieval *werk* ethic with a narrower modern ethics of work. In a long meditation Masciandaro draws on Calvin, Weber, Arendt, and Tawney (1962) to consider the differences between medieval *werk*'s polysemy and modern work's alleged separation from life. Not only does this seem to contradict his own agenda but the conceptual framework for the construction of the "modern" seems insubstantial.

The second and most successful chapter focuses on medieval histories of work. The stage is set by a consideration of John Ball's Adam and Eve and their representation of antediluvian labor as both egalitarian and necessary to the human condition prior to the construction of social class. By contrast the history of masonry contained in the Cooke manuscript rejects this Biblical history in favor of emphasizing the postdiluvian gentle origin of masons, which is derived from the higher status of their art. Their aristocratic aspiration is signaled by their awareness of History in both the products of their labor (the cathedral and the castle) and in the commissioning of the Cooke manuscript. By contrast with the gentle masons, Gower is seen as the bourgeois. His treatment of labor in the *Confessio Amantis* advances the archetypal bourgeois cause of seeing work as an expression of virtue, and virtue (not birth) as the path to *gentillesse*. This leaves Chaucer in the *Former Age* to reject the status of work altogether and to embrace alienation from it, in a world view "in which authentic work, work without complicity in the world's violence and greed, is not only unavailable but unimaginable."

The final chapter, "My Werk," focuses on fragment VIII of *The Canterbury Tales* to pursue the late fourteenth-century's interest in the subjective dimension of work. The opening paragraphs show a tendency to believe authors such as Gower: to read their protests at the greed and laziness of laborers as based on a realistic assessment of the actions of workers "motivated by desires of wealth and status." Such common sense generalizations about work essentially buy into Gower's agenda and unconsciously reproduce it. Masciandaro's treatment of The Canon's Yeoman's Tale and The Second Nun's Tale takes the work-idleness distinction as its major theme. First he sets up the chapter in relation to Langland's *apologia* which starts with the "poet-cleric's alienation from . . . material labor" but ends with "his renewed and deepened identification with the labor he has chosen and been called to." In the end it is this thesis of the necessity of choice which emerges as the partially unvoiced conclusion to *The Voice of the Hammer*: The first two chapters argued that separate categories of labor and their vocabularies became fused in a more general conception of *werk* in which all labor had productive value, and in this chapter this value is seen to lie in work's opposition to idleness. Masciandaro argues that the Yeoman's rejection of the idle work of alchemy in preference for the true work of telling his tale, like the Second Nun's desire for authorship, are both stories of choice in which alternative varieties of work are scrutinized. In both cases meaningful work can be the only right choice in preference to idleness, and in both cases the most meaningful work is found in the work of authorship.

The book has no conclusion. The last paragraph of the last chapter dwells on the elusiveness of work's meaning: "Work is always a work in progress . . . true work is an imperfectly realised ideal, a significance, that subsists in the human longing for it." And there the work ends, or rather suspends itself. In adopting the present tense, Masciandaro leaves us with the impression that his final words convey a kind of natural truth about humanity, whose condition is found in their longing for meaningful work rather than idleness. Gower could have no better apologist for his views on the "common little people" whose unwillingness to work at menial tasks deprived Gower of the food owed to his own table while he got on with the higher business of writing.

And thereby hangs the main problem. The *Voice of the Hammer* is undoubtedly a thought-provoking book with some very clever ideas, which are beautifully expressed. But as a PhD thesis it really needed more revision for the author to develop, and above all clarify, his purpose. I feel like Gower myself—get back to work, your necessary labor is not finished yet!

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A COMPANION TO MIDDLE ENGLISH HAGIOGRAPHY. Edited by Sarah Salih. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006. Pp. x + 182. \$85.

Middle English hagiography is an unwieldy narrative tradition. It encompasses large legendaries, sermon cycles, individual legends in verse and prose, as well as a range of short forms such as lyrics and prayers. Earlier surveys of the genre include Charlotte D'Evelyn's chapter in the *Manual of Writings in Middle English* and Manfred Görlach's *Studies in Middle English Saints' Legends*, both of which catalogue the central texts. Sarah Salih's *Companion to Middle English Hagiography* offers us another kind of introduction, one which approaches the tradition from a range of perspectives and methods; as befits a Companion, it serves as much as an introduction to critical work on saints' lives as it does to the genre itself.

Salih's introduction helpfully locates Middle English hagiography in terms of late medieval religious and social practices. This provides both a warrant and a method for reading saints' lives as cultural texts, imbedded in material, ritual, and social life. And it follows one of the signal decisions that Salih has made in organizing the volume: to present Middle English hagiography in a synchronic framework—with essays on the relationship between legends and other aspects of cults (Samantha Riches), manuscripts and audiences that read them (Mary Beth Long), some of their central thematics (Claire M. Waters on power and authority, Robert Mills on violence, and Anke Bernau on gender and sexuality), their relationship to historiographic traditions (Katherine J. Lewis) and to other narrative forms (Matthew Woodcock). This is an important departure from the way the genre is usually defined: that is, through its long history, from founding texts such as the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, to monastic *vitae* and pastoral legendaries such as the *Legenda Aurea*, with vernacular texts understood as late iterations of this tradition. This diachronic model, with its attendant methodologies, especially reading vernacular legends against Latin "originals," is one reason vernacular legends have been marginal to the study of history, as Katherine Lewis argues in her contribution to the volume, and—for somewhat different reasons—why they remained marginal to Middle English studies until recently. Read in the context of the history of the genre, saints' lives can seem separate from history itself, preserved by their form