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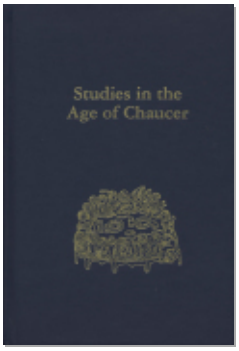
Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and Their Books, 1473-1557 (review)



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to bring to the fore their resonance with Jean and Dante. His final section, on the maxim "wordes moote be cosyn to the dede" (I.742), reads the efforts to attain proper speech in the *Tales* against Dante's single volume bound with love (*Paradiso* 33.86), and it tracks the dispersal of language and writing into troping, counterfeit, and mere style.

Language and the Declining World presents a learned and elegant model for reading within an intertextual tradition of commentary and poetic influence. Tradition, as Fyler conceives it for Chaucer, is manifest in a "general dependence on a background of discussion and commentary" (p. 155); the same broad principle applies to Jean and Dante. Moreover, the links between the three poets mark a historical line of influence and transmission. One might object that Fyler's interpretive framework takes certain features of influence for granted. Speculation about language, particularly in the High and late Middle Ages, extended further than the question of origins. If learned commentary forms a background to vernacular poetry, we would like to see not just the major sources but also important intermediaries, such as Guyart Desmoulins's French translation of Peter Lombard's *Historia Scholastica*, which Fyler brings to bear on discussion of *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. Dante certainly operates within dominant forms of language doctrine, as Fyler shows, but the development of his views in earlier works as well as the *Commedia* is highly complex, and the *Paradiso* ends as much with the failure of language ("A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa" [33.142]) as the alignment of desire, will, and divine love. Chaucer might seem in some ways too easy and obvious a destination for the book, but here Fyler shows the practical value of his approach and his careful attention to the absorption of ideas and poetic resonance. The trajectory he traces for language explains how Chaucer's famous evasions and indeterminacy are not just aesthetic effects but the consequence of a profound vision of a fallen world and failed language.

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Alexandra Gillespie. *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and Their Books, 1473–1557*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xiv, 281. £53.00; $95.00.

Most books in the area of manuscript/early book studies make for dense reading. Marshaling codicological or transmission detail into a coherent

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and exciting literary history can be like herding cats. But when it works, it really works. Alexandra Gillespie's book is one that does.

Like all such studies, her thesis is complex, and justly so. She has chosen an especially difficult time span (1473–1557), which carries her across period boundaries that still—despite recent fascination with the long fifteenth century—remain semicharted territory. She covers the transition of Chaucer and Lydgate into print, beginning with a chapter on Caxton and coming up through the chapter "Assembling Chaucer's Texts in Print, 1517 to 1532" and "Court and Cloister: Editions of Lydgate, 1509 to 1534." The book ends with a broader discussion of sixteenth-century book-trade issues, "The Press, the Medieval Author, and the English Reformations, 1534 to 1557," intelligently invoking "reformations" in the plural.

Chaucer and Lydgate (whatever their unequal merits as poets) are the twin giants of secular book production in this period. Chapter 1 opens with Caxton's accolade of Lydgate as an important model for his own literary translations: "I . . . am not worthy to bere his penner and ynkhorne after hym, to medle me in that werke" (p. 27). But meddle he did, and Caxton's own authorship, or better, "translatorship," is the catalyst for Gillespie's multidisciplinary study of the political, oral, literary, and commercial factors in early print production. Using these issues to create a kind of bibliographic sociology, she sees early print as conducted in the "context of a set of social relations—a gift economy in which the writer is supplicant, 'bounde' or seeking bondage within a system of noble patronage and reward; networks of fellowship and fraternity in which the desire of 'gentilmen' is met by the printer who can then identify them as 'frendes'; a culture of Christian devotion . . . and finally a money economy" (p. 28). Gillespie keeps these various factors consistently in view and in tension throughout the book.

To hold all this together, she chose to focus on the idea of the author in late medieval/early modern culture. One of the delightful aspects of the book is that even though she begins by citing Foucault's now hoary "What is an author?" she very quickly moves beyond it. While she notes that medieval writers can and do name the *auctor* in ways that conform to Foucault, in medieval manuscripts the author's name and much else pertinent to reproduction history "regularly disappears." She also resists "the teleological drift of much work on early printing," and the current tendency to abandon the word "Renaissance" in favor of "Early Modern." By using both terms interchangeably in her book, she makes the

point that "new ways of representing the medieval author in print are linked in this study to the Renaissance recuperation of classical traditions and to early modern social and religious change" (p. 9). Given its terminus in 1557, one hopes that her book will be edifying to early modern scholars: "one of the points I wish to make in this study is that the very accommodating idea of the author represented by classical tradition did not have to be reinvented by the Renaissance. . . . The author was a way of managing with the idea of the text in the world of the Middle Ages as well" (pp. 10–11). Amen, amen.

Even though early print is her topic, Gillespie's firm grasp of the recent exciting developments in Middle English manuscript studies allows her to see important continuities: the sudden rise of Middle English texts, the "paper revolution," the growth of "speculative trade in medieval manuscripts," the rapid reproduction of Gower's works, and the self-publishing habits of Hoccleve and Capgrave can all illuminate, in certain ways, the issues of the print period. Of this extrapolation, Gillespie writes: "Printing *accelerated* an existing traffic in texts, and changes we perceive as being in some way related to the newness of print—including the emergence of the author—cannot be detached from old ways of thinking about what it means for a text to be written, copied or read" (p. 16).

Gillespie typically tackles a problem by offering a succinct assessment of the previous scholarship, a moderate position on it, her own further evidence, and then a cross-grained example, just to remind us how complex all literary reception history is. The space available to me here does not allow for many examples, so I have chosen a few interesting ones having to do with Chaucerian transmission. In the third chapter, Gillespie discusses the gender issues of generations of "gentil" Chaucerian readers, up to the dangerous period of Henry VIII. Having traced the remarkable misogyny that dogs the reception of *Troilus and Criseyde* thus far, Gillespie closes the chapter with poignant and countervailing evidence from the Devonshire Manuscript, showing the *loyalty* men express about women under persecution in the social circle of Anne Boleyn (p. 143). The surprising, cross-grained, or sometimes counterintuitive reading is a hallmark of Gillespie's work; one can find it, for instance, in her evidence for Continental influence in the production of Chaucer's *Workes* of 1532, which is set against the evidence for its simultaneous assertion of English literary sovereignty (pp. 137–38). One sees it in her temperate analysis of the significance of John Shirley in relation to the rise of

"organized, commercial, and even speculative production of manuscripts in England before the arrival of the press." Downplaying Shirley's own role in this rise in favor of the Hammond-scribe's, she then complicates the thesis by noting that even the Hammond-scribe's work (1460–80) postdates the arrival of print (pp. 48–50). Finally, she argues that just as Lydgate's *Troy Book* relies on Chaucerian authorship as a springboard for authorial ambition, and Caxton's in turn on Lydgate, so too do these *auctors* also "close in" upon the ambitions of the younger writers (p. 42). Gillespie never settles for the easy or obvious answers.

Of course, some queries spring to mind. Given that the emphasis on authorship throughout skews Gillespie's findings in favor of named authors and classical traditions, would there be a way to conceive of the study so as to foreground, say, the 1550 editions of *Piers Plowman* as much as, for instance, the 1532 Chaucer? Would more emphasis on the printing of medieval mystical texts (as pioneered by Goldschmidt) reveal a different kind of sociology of the book (one thinks of Kempe or the *Orcherd of Syon*)? Undoubtedly it would. But these subjects, though mentioned, are not Gillespie's primary concern. Her primary concern—the print tradition of Chaucer and Lydgate especially—is beautifully realized, and a great addition to our history of the book.

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FRANK GRADY. *Representing Righteous Heathens in Late Medieval England*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Pp. 214. $65.00.

Representing Righteous Heathens is a sharply focused monograph that, in spite of its concision, covers a great deal of ground. Frank Grady suggests that the trope of the "righteous heathen" must be understood not only as a theological concept but as a literary "topos" (p. 70), and he goes on to explore the various ways that this trope was deployed in the cultural environment of late medieval England. The book is organized into four main chapters, each centered on one facet of the rich literary tradition of depicting righteous heathens in medieval England: "The Trouble with Trajan," "Mandeville's 'Gret Meruaylle,'" "The Middle English Alexander," and "The Rhetoric of the Righteous Heathen." A