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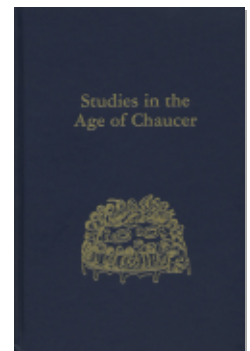
*Fragments and Assemblages: Forming Compilations of Medieval
London* by Arthur Bahr (review)

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REVIEWS

ARTHUR BAHR. *Fragments and Assemblages: Forming Compilations of Medieval London*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. Pp. x, 285. \$45.00 cloth.

The book consists of an introduction followed by four chapters that discuss: manuscripts produced by (or “supervised by”) a fourteenth-century Londoner, Andrew Horn; the Auchinleck MS; Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*; and the Trentham MS of Gower. These seem reasonably well researched, although research is not really the goal here; rather, each defined corpus (a group of manuscripts, a single manuscript, a literary text) is subjected to a critical reading—what I suppose could be styled the codicological version of the very New Critical readings of a distant and undefined scholarly past from which Bahr struggles at several points to distinguish himself. What links these four disparate subjects is stated in the keywords of the title: “Fragments,” “Assemblages,” “Compilations,” “London.”

I will state from the outset that I am very skeptical of this kind of study and the assumptions that underlie it, whether the subject is manuscript collections (I claim no particular expertise here) or those compilations of printed books known as “tract volumes,” or *Sammelbände*, with which I am more familiar. Bahr’s interest and the intellectual task from which he claims to derive “delight” (256–57) lie in the readings themselves, and the value of the book depends on them; I am more interested in the method and assumptions (admittedly a secondary concern for Bahr), and that is what I will focus on here.

The reasons texts were put together in single manuscripts or bound volumes of printed books vary. These reasons are sometimes irrecoverable (why anyone did anything in history is rarely clear), and when they are recoverable, they are often not always that interesting or illuminating. One way to approach this problem is simply to look at other compilations: when you survey a number of them (whether manuscripts or printed *Sammelbände*) you can begin to see distinctions and differences; you can see (or imagine) types of composite volumes, perhaps a scale on which these might form a continuum. Volume X is intentional, Volume Y, by contrast, accidental. Volume Z is authorial. Another one is scribal.

Thus Bahr's apparent method—to bring various types of compilations together—has potential. You might be able to say something about the nature of one compilation by contrasting it with another. What Bahr does here is different: each of his four different compilations is given what appears to be an independent close reading. The relations are not really dealt with, even when they are obvious (Chaucer/Gower), nor when they are apparently remote (how is Horn's corpus of manuscripts in any way comparable to the *Canterbury Tales* as represented in modern editions?).

The following theses and assumptions are stated repeatedly in the introduction: "This book . . . contends that we can productively bring comparable interpretive strategies to bear on the formal characteristics of both physical manuscripts and literary works" (1) (i.e., manuscript compilations are "texts"); "I define *compilation*, not as an objective quality . . . but rather as a mode of perceiving such forms so as to disclose an interpretably meaningful arrangement" (3) (i.e., historical objects are critical objects); "a compilation relies on the perspective of its readers" (11). (I believe this is also the implication of the syntax of the subtitle, where a close reading reveals that the implied agent of "forming" is the modern scholar.) Onto these main assumptions is grafted what I'll call a thematic assertion: all these compilations have to do in some way with civic matters, whether the city of London, or the royal succession. "They are thus four compilations from medieval London, that, when assembled and apprehended together, become a compilation of medieval London" (4). This is not much of a thesis—it is rather a recent popular topic (David Wallace's *Chaucerian Polity* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999]; Ralph Hanna's *London Literature, 1300–1380* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005]). And to assert that the *Canterbury Tales* is about the city of London in some way, as is Horn's *custumal*, or as is any other of the millions of literary works written in London, is not to say very much.

Other themes and ancillary theses are suggested: Fragment I of the *Canterbury Tales* introduces a "Low Countries" motif that leads to a second thread in the work, linking *The Pardoner's Tale*, *The Squire's Tale*, *Sir Thopas*, and *The Cook's Tale*. This sounds productive, but becomes silly once we hear it named: "Franco-Flemish-tinged Knight–Squire compilational thread" (184) (which sounds, I believe, like a Gilbert and Sullivan patter song), or the variant "Cook-inflected Knight–Squire thread" (192). The London *pu*y is somehow reminiscent of the Arras *pu*y of the

thirteenth century (32, 88), and this in turn justifies or echoes that Franco-Flemish aspect of the *Canterbury Tales*. Bahr's introduction has some extensive and enthusiastic references to Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. Benjamin then appears, completely out of the blue, in every subsequent chapter—every chapter, that is, except the last, which was written first. This type of name-dropping association illuminates neither the medieval subject at hand nor the Frankfurt critics who had no interest in these subjects. The same could be said of many of the cited authorities here. Obviously, the subject matter here is in part legitimized by Hanna's *London Literature*, which discusses Horn, the Auchinleck MS and Chaucer within the context of the "city." To continue Hanna's project (or critique it) seems to me to be a worthwhile endeavor; yet, there is no sustained critique or even discussion of it here. Does Bahr agree with Hanna? Disagree? Is his method the same? Different? Was Hanna right or wrong to select his subjects as he did? Readers are left to determine that on their own.

Bahr is at several points concerned with distancing himself from anything that smacks of New Criticism, however that might be defined (e.g., 217). But few New Critics wrote in accordance with their caricatures by "post" New Critics. Most of them did exactly what Bahr does—seek for subtle meanings, structures, and themes in a given text (however that "text" is defined) with eclectic references to historical context whenever they might help. Bahr's casual associations of the terms "literary," "aesthetic," "close reading"; his explicit denial that he is engaged in "codicological New Criticism" (217); and his dismissive rejection of Mary A. and Richard H. Rouse's *Authentic Witnesses* (which Bahr rightly or wrongly thinks could be cited against his approach [103])—none of this is clearly enough presented to critique in any serious way. Surely an author might "care about how a manuscript appeared." But that does not in and of itself constitute literariness: it might be an economic consideration, an aesthetic one, or a psychological one. I don't see that such an imagined concern necessarily implies a thematic relation of the texts involved. By the same token, a writer could produce a vast tissue of allusions, parodies, and self-reflections, with little concern for the physical appearance of the final product (most of us have likely produced these ourselves).

Furthermore, what Bahr means by "codicological" matters is not as clear as it might be. Most readers will assume that he is giving close readings of a literary text (or texts) in light of its codicological form as

materially embodied in a manuscript. But I'm not sure what this material object turns out to be. All citations in this book are to printed editions, even nineteenth-century ones, or, in the case of the Auchinleck MS, the facsimile. The codicological evidence, thus, has been thoroughly textualized (in the sense that it has been made reproducible) before becoming a subject of discussion.

Finally, I am most unsettled by what may be a stylistic matter, but what I believe masks the most important assumption here—the frequent claims that these medieval compilations, texts, or manuscripts, agented or not, are perfect expressions of our own interests and sensibilities. Bahr's compilations repeatedly “invite” us to do, well, precisely what we as professional critics like to do. Each is a “potential source of aesthetic resonance and an invitation to literary analysis” (11). They suggest things, problematize them, “defer . . . the prospect of closure” (106), “[encourage] more creative forms of interpretation” (60). They exhibit “strongly textual self-representation,” (159); they are “shifting and allusive,” and “receptive to the kinds of close readings that have generally been reserved for texts, self-consciously literary or otherwise” (155). They are “invitations to compilational constructions” (155), “physical incitements to rereading” (115). They show “precise and subtle concatenations of theme and image,” “teasingly encouraging [their] audience to engage in precisely such interpretation of the text itself” (135); are “invitations to think of . . . texts in terms of and against one another” (105). It is as if all these entities have lain dormant for over 600 years waiting for their ideal readers who just happen to be professional academics working on their résumés today. In short, and resoundingly: the compilation “begs to be analyzed . . . we have obliged” (105).

I reiterate: this review is directed only at the method, not at the four individual close readings, which seem perfectly professional and competent. But to me, this book thus turns out to be (reversing Bahr's own phrase on page 255) less than the sum of its parts. The otherwise competent readings are seriously undermined when put together like this, where the weakness of any overriding thesis and the shallowness of the method and assumptions are most exposed. So what if Benjamin's *Arcades Project* is like three of the four choices? So what if works written in London allude to London? How can we attribute intent and selection to a compilation such as Horn's corpus when we do not have a clear idea of what he selected from? What do these manuscripts look and smell like? How long do libraries allow you to examine them? Who/

what is/are the *Canterbury Tales*? How can the apparently displaced and conspiratorial agency in all these works have been missed until today? It will likely sound more condescending than I mean it to be to state that I am in some sympathy with the professional requirements placed on younger scholars. I could write a “compilation,” “assemblage,” “set of fragments”—all these now fashionable things—with no overriding thesis whatsoever; after brow-beating enough presses, I might get someone to give in. I don’t believe history is all that coherent, and I am luckily, through no particular virtues of my own, in a position to express that belief formally. Junior scholars do not have that luxury and are far more constrained by the monograph genre, which increasingly is the only form recognized by dull-headed administrators and their well-meaning minions on tenure and promotion committees. An overriding thesis or *grand récit* will almost inevitably imply an overriding logic or coherence in the history that is its subject. The banality of that required thesis and associated assumptions then gets in the way, as it surely does here, of what are otherwise perceptive, intelligent, and well-considered observations on particular literary subjects and texts.

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ROBERT BARTLETT. *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. Pp. xviii, 637. \$39.95.

Robert Bartlett’s compendious account of saint worship from the martyrs to the Reformation explores the connection between the spread of western Christianity and the phenomenal development of a huge pantheon of Christian saints. Saints were a ubiquitous presence in medieval life, celebrated at shrines and churches; in processions and festivals; and in an “opulent visual culture” (490) that included wall and panel paintings, statues, stained-glass windows, vestments, reliquaries, textiles, and—for the well-to-do—illuminations. There was a steady growth of literary narratives devoted to the lives of saints as well, from third-century accounts of Roman persecutions; to martyrologies, *Miracle Books*, and sermons in both Latin and European vernaculars from the