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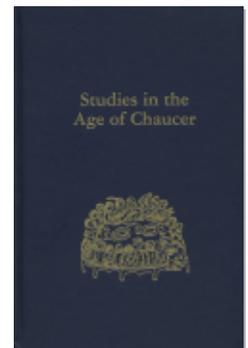
*Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture* ed. by Katie  
L. Walter (review)

Pablo Maurette

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necessitates yet another pilgrimage, one announced in the poem's closing lines. For Steiner, this ending allows Langland to confront "some of the problems inherent in authorial revision and in the institutionalization of irregular lives" (216). This is an ingenious way of trying to make sense of the poem's chaotic non-ending, and one that invites further elaboration.

In terms of its audience, the book can be used profitably by those with a long-standing knowledge of the poem as well as those encountering it for the first time. Proficient at defining terms and texts, it could supplement or even replace John Alford's *A Companion to Piers Plowman*, a stand-by regularly assigned by many of us who teach the poem. To either their relief or their consternation, readers looking for a discussion of the complex relations among the poem's many manuscript versions will not find it here. The decision to discuss the B-text is dispatched briefly with the claim that this version "is the most formally and intellectually experimental of the three main versions" (2). Beyond the contextual basics, the book contains substantive new insights for those who have read and taught the poem for years, particularly on the subject of Langland's relation to other fourteenth-century writers such as the *Cursor mundi* poet, Rolle, Mandeville, Trevisa, and Chaucer.

Within literary studies, *Reading Piers Plowman* demonstrates the continuing vitality of the *explication de texte* genre in a publishing world largely dominated by thematic monographs that tend to wander vagrant-like across centuries and over national borders, corralling disparate authors and their works along the way. The book also performs a more local service. If *Piers Plowman* scholarship can occasionally seem like a closed shop, with scholars of the poem speaking mainly to other scholars of the poem, Steiner's book opens up this conversation to a wider audience, one that can, with her help, see why the poem is "a show-stopping example of medieval visionary poetics" (13).

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KATIE L. WALTER, ed. *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture*.  
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. xx, 225. £53.00.

One of the most vibrant trends in recent medieval and early modern studies is the focus on the cultural history of the senses. In the past ten

years the number of works dedicated to the matter has skyrocketed, and the fascination with the senses—in particular with the so-called “lower senses” (smell, taste, and touch)—does not seem to be waning. Although framed from a historicist perspective, studies of the (lower) senses in the Middle Ages and early modern period are consistently characterized by being both interdisciplinary and transcultural. In this sense, *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture*, included in *The New Middle Ages*—the very prolific series published by Palgrave and directed by Bonnie Wheeler—constitutes a rich and very timely contribution to the topic.

Among the senses, the history of touch is without a doubt the one that twentieth-century scholarship has neglected the most. In the past ten years, this oversight has not only been noted, but also repaired to a great degree. Nevertheless, there are still vast expanses of unexplored territory waiting to be charted. As the organ of touch, skin is, indeed, one of these vital and undermined areas of inquiry. *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture* represents the most substantial attempt to undertake this issue in recent Anglo-American scholarship. Following the lead of *La pelle umana/The Human Skin* edited by Agostino Bagliani and published in the series *Micrologus* (no. 13 [2005]), but also influenced by more general recent works by the likes of Nina Jablonski and Steven Connor, Walter’s edited volume gathers essays that deal with skin in medieval culture, juxtaposing disciplines such as medicine, natural philosophy, literature, cultural history, the history of the book, visual culture, and others.

The approach to skin as a primal metaphor for mediation runs through the volume and gives the collection a sense of conceptual harmony that testifies to the proficiency of its editor. Such conceptual harmony, however, should not be confused with homogeneity; the essays contained in this volume cover a wide thematic spectrum, since the authors’ shared understanding of skin as a liminal space helps them read a variety of cultural phenomena from a very unique perspective. As Walter herself says in the introduction, *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture* attempts to “meditate on the significance of skin for expressing the human condition as well as attending to questions of the relation of the human to the other in its various guises: the divine, the cultural or racial other, the animal, the monstrous, the inanimate or dead” (3). Walter adds that one of the aims of the collection is to engage twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural theories, such as those of

Michel Serres, Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Roberto Esposito. This is perhaps the least interesting aspect of the project, and most of the essays that do try to establish a dialogue between medieval texts and contemporary theory fall short of justifying the interpretative advantages of doing so.

The first essay, Lara Farina's "Wondrous Skins and Tactile Affection: The Blemmye's Touch," constitutes the strongest contribution in the volume. Farina finds in the image of a Blemmye—a headless body whose face is on its torso—from a manuscript copy of *Wonders of the World*, an illustration of a uniquely medieval way of understanding the sense of touch, which derives from contemporary readings of Aristotle. According to Farina, the monstrosity of the Blemmye, "an imaginative representation of a body organized by the sense of touch," challenges ocular perception and forces the spectator to ponder human sensation as a tactile, rather than as an ocular, phenomenon. Among other things, Farina stresses the connections among reading and touching, skin and parchment. Susan Small's brilliant essay, "The Medieval Werewolf Model of Reading Skin," likewise engages the question of monstrosity and skin, this time from a linguistic perspective. Small argues that the werewolf is not a marvel, but rather a text to be read. The relation among skin, parchment, and reading in the Middle Ages is quite pervasive throughout the volume, but is explored most successfully in Virginia Langum's essay, "Discerning Skin: Complexion, Surgery and Language in Medieval Confession." Langum explores medieval examples of a discipline that flourishes in the Early Modern period with the works of Michele Savonarola and Giambattista Della Porta, namely, clinical physiognomy. This discipline construed the body as a text that, if properly deciphered, reveals the mysteries of the soul in its relations both to the material world and to the divine. A close look at medical and confessional texts by Saint Augustine, Alain de Lille, John Metham, and others allows Langum to differentiate among three hermeneutic approaches to skin: material (the skin itself and its unique idiosyncrasies), metaphoric (the skin as borderland, as envelope, etc.), and metonymic ("the skin not only covers the soul, but reveals it"). Langum develops a rich analysis of this third—and most interesting—"metonymic" approach, not only by focusing on the rather unexplored territory of medieval physiognomy, but also by appealing to Paul Ricoeur's analysis of metonymy as contiguity.

This is perhaps the only example in *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature*

*and Culture* of a successful engagement with contemporary theory. Langum borrows a concept and succeeds in showing that it not only sheds light on the issue at hand without engendering anachronistic dissonance, but also opens up new paths for understanding the complex relationship between science and religion in the Middle Ages. The collection also includes Robert Mills's "Havelok's Bare Life and the Significance of Skin" and Katie L. Walter's "The Form of the Formless: Medieval Taxonomies of Skin, Flesh, and the Human," two essays that tackle fascinating topics related to medieval conceptions of the body. The former essay discusses extreme physical punishment; the latter examines the connection between skin and conceptions of race. Mills and Walter engage theoretical notions by Didier Anzieu, Agamben, Nancy, and Esposito, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but do not manage to convince the reader of the advantages of such "conversations." As for the remaining essays, they include Elizabeth Robertson's "*Noli me tangere*: The Enigma of Touch in Middle English Religious Literature and Art for and about Women," Isabel Davis's "Cutaneous Time in the Late Medieval Literary Imagination," and Julie Orlemanski's "Desire and Defacement in *The Testament of Cresseid*." The book ends with Karl Steel's response to the collection, which emphasizes the importance and urgency of the topic. Steel is right, and it is precisely here, and not in the ad hoc invocations to contemporary theorists, that the relevance of this book for twenty-first-century readers lies. The history of the lower senses, in particular touch and its organ, the skin—the largest, most complex organ in the human body—becomes ever more relevant as debates around corporeality, sexuality, gender, and race intensify. *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture* continues a long neglected and crucial chapter of this history.

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DAVID WATT, *The Making of Thomas Hoccleve's "Series."* Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2013. \$99.95.

Writing poetry about writing poetry is a temptation that few poets have resisted. Thomas Hoccleve is not among that select few. In the middle of