



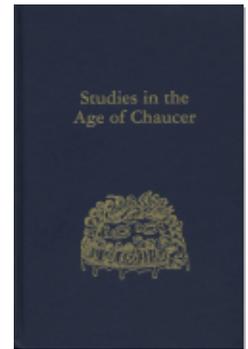
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*The Making of Thomas Hoccleve's "Series"* by David Watt  
(review)

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*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

the twentieth century, Robert Graves dismissed “what passes as English poetry” as “the product of either careerism, or keeping one’s hand in: a choice between vulgarity and banality.” David Watt’s book, *The Making of Thomas Hoccleve’s “Series,”* attempts to uncover where along that spectrum we can place Hoccleve’s literary labor and its products as aesthetic and material propositions.

Watt takes as his primary subject the process, not the product, of Hoccleve’s writing, and to that end interrogates its material remnants and the poetic fictions of its composition. Watt begins his book with a bold observation: “This is not the book I initially planned to write. The version of this book that I had in my head was never the version on the page in front of me” (1). Such a statement is honest, and draws attention to the chasms between intentionality and execution that are at the heart of all creative and critical endeavors. At the same time, Watt implies that the book escaped his control in some way. Though he thus sets up a parallel for his arguments about the complexities of Hoccleve’s compositional difficulties, it is a disturbing beginning. His frank honesty about the potential failures of process suggest that the product, too, may be problematic. The book offers a sustained engagement with the entirety of Hoccleve’s *Series*, and though many of its points are locally persuasive, it does not quite succeed in offering a critical framework that can make compelling sense of the gap between anticipation and execution it perceives in Hoccleve’s poetry.

More successful is Watt’s attempt to focus on both the ephemerality and the materialities of the poetic process. As Watt argues in the book’s introduction, “the *Series* offers a reflection *on*, not a reflection *of*, his [Hoccleve’s] conception of book production” (4). To this end, Watt marshals paleographical evidence along with careful close readings of the entirety of Hoccleve’s *Series*, a sequence of five distinct and interrelated Middle English poems, the best known of which are the first two, the “Complaint” and “Dialogue.” “Learn to Die” has occasioned some more recent criticism, but the remaining two poems, “The Tale of Jereslaus’s Wife” and “The Tale of Jonathas,” have warranted little critical attention over many years. A book-length study of Hoccleve’s *Series* is a welcome contribution to the field. Watt is to be commended for his sustained focus on Hoccleve’s complexly allusive poetry, and his careful encounter with the manuscript instantiations of that verse.

The three autograph manuscripts of Hoccleve’s poetry (or possibly four, as Linne Mooney has recently argued in these pages) have been

disproportionately subject to the kind of paleographically and codicologically grounded literary criticism that Watt assays. The first chapter of *The Making* attempts to construct Hoccleve's likely audience "in and for the *Series*" through the lens of San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 111. Watt reads the claims of Hoccleve's narrator persona "Thomas" as reflecting and responding to the issues faced by Hoccleve and his poetry, and its reception by a coterie readership among the clerks of the Privy Seal. Watt argues Hoccleve's poems "are meant to circulate among those at work in the Privy Seal and elsewhere in Westminster Hall" (31). That "elsewhere" ultimately covers quite a bit of ground, deriving from Ethan Knapp's exposition of Hoccleve's bureaucratic vision and Emily Steiner's Langlandian documentary imagination, and stretching back to the coterie audiences of *Piers Plowman* described by Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and others. Watt asserts an imagined audience ranging from the king, to the upper echelons of the nobility, to Hoccleve's fellow clerks. His depiction of a stratified and plural audience for the *Series*, its multiple valences carefully crafted by Hoccleve, is surely spot on, but not a particularly remarkable claim for poetry very near the center of the networks of late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English poetry.

Chapter 2 turns to the copy of "Learn to Die" surviving in another holograph manuscript, Huntington Library, MS HM 744. The chapter argues for a reading audience intimately familiar with the physical processes of making books. That is, Watt sets out Hoccleve's poem, and the process of reading it, as analogous to medieval bookmaking: a series of decisions made, a series of crises and cruxes resolved. By treating bookmaking as having duration (acknowledging the important thinking on the matter by Daniel Wakelin), Watt positions the bookmaker as having responsibility for decisions in the "early" and "late" stages of manuscript production. These arguments rely upon a somewhat odd notion of booklet production, claiming "The structural coherence of the *Series* as a *story* depends on its readers' ability to imagine it being made by a narrator who uses booklet production to defer making decisions about its final form as long as possible" (66). Medieval writers don't write bound books. Textual and structural mobility are made possible at the level of the quire and the booklet, but can also be integral to the imagined design of a manuscript, or come about as an afterthought in the very last moments before quires are bound together, or, indeed, take place after binding through annotations indicating misplaced blocks of

text. Final decisions about medieval books are always deferred, not by booklet-based composition but by the duration of the material processes of book writing and binding. In this chapter, Watt also discusses the oft-repeated assessment of the economic precariousness of vernacular bookmaking in the early fifteenth century. As against the ubiquitous business of making Latin prayerbooks, the creation of vernacular books may well have been less common, but given how often critics have trotted this idea out, it cannot have been all that radical or risky an undertaking.

The peculiar gaps and lapses of Hoccleve's writings occupy Chapter 3. Watt sees in another Hoccleve holograph, Durham University Library, MS Cosin.V.III.9, the conceptual frame that makes sense of the decision to cease translating "Learn to Die"—"The perils of excessive thought" (116) in the theologically complex age of Arundel and Chichele. Moving away from the paleographical criticism of the previous chapters to read instead the *Series* against a broad textual and historical backdrop, Watt traces a shift in Hoccleve's *Series*, from writing about writing books, to instead writing about *not* writing particular books. Watt suggests that "this choice therefore allows Hoccleve to foreground the kind of anxiety that might be generated by the translation of a theological text in the vernacular during the period" (129). The argument is not wholly convincing, and Watt acknowledges this by hazarding that "it is tempting to read this scene as parody . . . [or as] being critical of the popularity of these texts or of the narrator for being over-cautious" (129).

There is another, rather less studied manuscript in Hoccleve's hand: the formulary now preserved in London, British Library, MS Additional 24062. To this can be added the other manuscripts and documents that Linne Mooney, Simon Horobin, and Estelle Stubbs have ascribed to Hoccleve's hand as part of the online *Late Medieval English Scribes* project, though Watt does not address these most recent identifications. In Chapter 4, he does an excellent job of bringing out the conceptual richness of a physical book that is both copy and exemplar, one designed and organized to be accessed as a model for its maker, and also for future generations of makers. Watt reads *The Series* as offering a moralizing model grounded in book culture, one that enables the construction of an ethical, scribally minded readership. The heterogeneity of both Hoccleve's formulary and the *Series* as a whole is central to Watt's vision for that lesson. Ultimately, Watt sees in Hoccleve's poetry a modest

argument about the difficulties of personal spiritual reform in a theologically complicated moment. That reform is not encountered as a nested series of spiritual crises as in *Piers Plowman*, but through the lens of a day job reading and writing in the cogs of the bureaucratic, text-producing machine of early fifteenth-century London.

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SUSAN YAGER and ELISE E. MORSE-GAGNÉ, eds. *Interpretation and Performance: Essays for Alan Gaylord*. Provo, Utah: The Chaucer Studio Press, 2013. Pp. xxxii, 214. \$60.00 cloth.

Alan T. Gaylord, Professor Emeritus of Dartmouth College, is a Chaucerian who merits a festschrift. Susan Yager and Elise E. Morse-Gagné have succeeded in assembling a band of highly respected scholars to pay tribute to Gaylord's achievements in the fields of Chaucerian and Middle English studies: achievements most emphatically, though by no means exclusively, connected with the issue of performing Chaucer's texts. The facet of "performance" that one most readily associates with Alan T. Gaylord is the practice of reading Chaucer aloud. Indeed, Gaylord's Kalamazoo seminars on how to present Chaucerian verse to an audience and how this kind of presentation matters in terms of understanding and interpreting Chaucer's texts have entered the world of scholarly legend. It comes as no surprise, then, that the volume embraces a notion of "performance" that follows closely in the footsteps of the approach so successfully championed by Gaylord himself.

This lends a certain coherence to the collection, though some readers would have been grateful for a more analytical and theorized take on the issue of performance. After all, "performance" has long ceased to be a scholarly field solely concerned with the theatricality or the public delivery of texts. The concept of performance has spread considerably beyond those original confines, so that nowadays notions of "the performative" have invigorated medieval studies in topics ranging from manuscript study to liturgy, from court culture to the rhetorical and disputational practices embedded in medieval Latin school texts. In other words, it could have been interesting to meditate on how these