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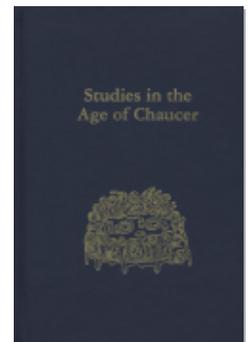
*Telling Tales: Sources and Narration in Late Medieval  
England* by Joel T. Rosenthal (review)

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Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 27, 2005, pp. 353-355 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2005.0021>



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JOEL T. ROSENTHAL. *Telling Tales: Sources and Narration in Late Medieval England*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003. Pp. 217. \$49.95.

The project of *Telling Tales* is to provide “a close reading of familiar historical texts from late medieval England” in order “to impose narrativity” upon them, the ultimate goal being “to impose social or sociological (if not literary) unity” upon the world from which they derive. What this somewhat rebarbative description means in practice is the analysis of three different archives—testimonies delivered in Proof of Age proceedings, depositions given in the course of the Scrope-Grosvenor dispute, and the letters of Margaret Paston—in order to elicit a sense of the world they directly or inadvertently describe. This is a bold and imaginative enterprise: the individual testimonies and depositions from the two judicial proceedings are brief and formulaic, and by limiting himself to Margaret Paston’s 104 letters from the family total of 306 Rosenthal deliberately excludes relevant evidence. These limitations are part of the book’s methodological point. Even the most unpromising materials, Rosenthal wishes to demonstrate, can be made to yield insights about late medieval English culture—specifically ways of understanding “the idea of community and the nature of memory”—that are otherwise unavailable. The results, unfortunately, suggest otherwise.

Proofs-of-age proceedings were held when an heir claimed to have reached the age of majority (twenty-one for men, sixteen for unmarried women, fourteen for married women) and wished to enter into property that had previously been held in wardship. As Rosenthal points out, these proceedings were not merely uncontested but were largely ceremonial. Twelve jurors with special knowledge testified to their knowledge that the heir was of age, usually by correlating the date of birth or baptism with some contemporaneous event in their own lives. Naturally this “proof” was entirely circular: that a birth or baptism occurred at the same time as some other event was hardly evidence that both took place the requisite number of years ago. But evidence was less important than testimony: if twelve men of substance were prepared to say that such-and-such was true, then—judicially if not ontologically—it was true. Rosenthal subjects some two thousand of these individual testimonies to a variety of analyses, some statistical, some thematic. He is interested in the distribution of ages among the jurors, the kinds of cognitive claims they made (did they see the baptism? did they hear about the

birth?), and the sorts of events they remembered. Fairly soon, however, the analysis declines into what Rosenthal frankly admits is “a choice of impressions and anecdotes.” Despite the claim that we will gain insight into “a world of feeling and evocative expression,” we actually get a series of occasionally amusing or suggestive incidents that do not finally add up to much. The author tends to render this material more evocative with a glaze of sentimentality—“such memories (and their elaboration through retelling) were the centerpiece of many an evening’s talk over ale or the spinning wheel”—although he is well aware of the dangers of “a ‘Merry England’ perspective.” He also knows that questions of status are crucial here, since the jurors are far from ordinary villagers and are testifying to the fitness of someone who more often than not will exercise some form of power over them. Nonetheless, the harsher realities of medieval social life are kept well out of sight. It is doubtless true that “the whole dynamic of the recollections emphasizes the cooperative and harmonious aspects of village life,” but of course that hardly means either that village life *was* cooperative and harmonious or that it was thought to be. It is also true, however, as Rosenthal disarmingly acknowledges, that neither this material nor his analysis is “going to open new vistas into behavior, life experience, or family relations.”

The depositions from the well-known Scrope-Grosvenor dispute over the coat of arms Azure, a bend Or are not much more promising: “The depositions’ repetitiveness is striking.” For Rosenthal, however, here is the chivalric world as seen from the inside. He describes these brief and formulaic accounts of battle sites where the deponent saw the Scrope arms (for some reason he excludes the pro-Grosvenor depositions) as “heroic tales about families and their deeds,” tales comparable to the *Iliad* and *Beowulf*—a comparison all the more charming for its extravagance. The brief lists the deponents provide should not even be compared to Gaston Febus whiling away a dull winter in his castle at Foix by dazzling the ever dutiful Froissart. They are simply lists, telling us little about the tellers. Rosenthal is of the Maurice Keen school of medieval chivalry, and he speaks in somewhat hushed tones of “men of high birth and valiant feats of arms,” men “who could look on a long and vigorous career, graced with military and civilian distinctions,” an “old fellowship” whose memories “were now covered with the rime of legend and nostalgia.” The greatest generation, indeed. Rosenthal knows that this kind of account is sentimental bunkum, and he knows too that Scrope was especially anxious about his arms because he came

from a family of lawyers. But this knowledge fades before the desire to make more of these texts than they can provide. Unable to offer new insights into the chivalric way of thinking, the depositions serve instead as the kind of complacent self-advertisements that have always appealed to the military mind.

Margaret Paston's letters are subjected to a detailed external analysis. The use of scribes, the structure of the letter, the form of salutation and farewell, the address, even the messengers who transported them are all queried—but to little effect. The following is an all-too-typical sentence: “The unknown hands pose a number of questions, none of which we can answer.” Thematically, Rosenthal provides a sensible if familiar account of the strong-willed and often unpleasant Margaret, and of the intensely competitive world in which she lived. Much of this chapter is paraphrase, but it avoids any hint of either bathos or exaggeration. In that sense it is the best chapter in the book.

This review has turned out to be less generous than it was meant to be. Rosenthal has attempted a difficult task, and if he has succeeded less well than one might have wished he should nonetheless be applauded for the effort. Perhaps the effort will inspire others, who will follow his path and find richer rewards. Or perhaps the pot of interpretive gold is just not there at all. In either case, the book should not be damned with faint praise, or given false praise, but admired for its ambition, its seriousness, and its intellectual honesty.

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D. VANCE SMITH. *Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary*. *Medieval Cultures* 33. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. Pp. xviii, 318. \$22.95 paper.

Vance Smith offers a dense and complex study of the medieval household, understood as central to both economic life and cultural practice in late fourteenth-century England. Drawing on a wide range of theorists from fields as diverse as economic anthropology, philosophy, and psychoanalysis, and incorporating extensive archival and historical research, Smith reads a handful of Middle English texts ranging from well