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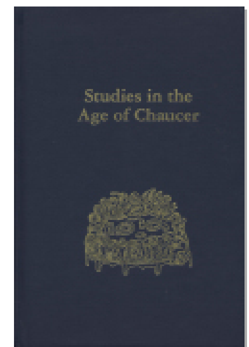
Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary by D. Vance Smith (review)



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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

to lesser known—*Winner and Waster*, *Piers Plowman*, *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Launfal*, and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*—in an attempt to trace the "household imaginary" that shapes them. Although the book moves well beyond its stated scope, particularly in its choice of literary texts to examine, its aim is to examine the household "as the trope that organizes the writing of romances in Middle English" (p. xiv).

The title of the book, which derives from Aristotle's description of the household as the location of the "possessive arts," signals Smith's particular interest in the economic significance of the household. Following the lead of social historians such as D. A. Starkey, Smith views the years after 1350 as the "age of the household," during which the household functioned as the most important institution in society. As historians have shown, the household had many guises: it was simultaneously a location, a social collectivity, and, most important for Smith's arguments, an "ideational place" in which "the commodities that allowed the very work of thinking to take place were kept" (p. 2). For Smith, the household is a crucial site that involves the self, the family, the realm, indeed, all life, and given this importance, it is no surprise that, as Smith notes, techniques for managing the household developed "in richly metaphorical and philosophical ways" (p. xiv).

The book's claim that Middle English romances take as their chief subject the exploration of an ethics of possession shaped by the household is boldly original. As Smith notes, the later fourteenth century was a period when ownership and dominion were matters of fascination and anxiety, and it thus makes sense that literary texts would frequently explore these subjects. Smith argues that the technical language of household management invades romances, perhaps because in his view their most likely authors were clerks responsible for household record-keeping. In English romances, we can see the working out of "a particular set of problems having to do with the household" (p. 6), particularly the problem of how to deal with surplus and excess, which Smith (following Bataille) views as an overriding concern in the period. Smith also considers the related problems of lack and scarcity, which he explores via psychoanalytic and economic theories. The role of gift-giving, anxieties about gentility in a monetary economy, and social mobility—including the apparent refusal to pursue it in some cases—all receive attention.

The range of reference is impressive. Bourdieu, Derrida, and Zizek all make appearances, as do Aristotle, Marx, and Freud, as well as Mary

Douglas, Félix Guattari, Melanie Klein, and many others. Government documents and legal records provide one source of historical evidence; objects from material culture, another—including heraldic insignia, merchants' marks, and coins. Smith moves with assurance across all this material, as comfortable discussing Freud's notion of the *unheimlich* as describing scholastic economic theory. One paragraph on page 48, for instance, segues from Isidore of Seville to Heidegger, and meshes Chaucer's *House of Fame* with the labor legislation of 1388, before ending in discussion of *communitas* and homelessness, all in the service of describing the way the imaginary household opened out to the larger world. This capaciousness enriches the book even if it at times risks obscuring the central arguments.

Smith's readings of literary texts are often brilliant and always provocative. He interprets the underworld in *Sir Orfeo*, for instance, as suggesting "the horror of a world whose inhabitants seem dead but are not, the horror of quiescent plenitude, of the remainder that is accumulated in the household" (p. 59), and describes Mont St. Michel in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* as a place of accumulated death whose surplus threatens the economy of the surrounding lands. *Winner and Waster*, the subject of chapter 3, is read alongside heraldic devices and merchants' marks as a poem that is "intensely interested in the discursive limits of possession" (p. 75), while *Piers Plowman*, in chapter 4, is treated from the perspective of its engagement with mercantile culture. Chapters 5 and 6 consider, respectively, *Sir Launfal*'s intersection with the sumptuary world, and patrimonial claims in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure.*

Arts of Possession takes its place within the ever-growing body of work devoted to reading medieval literary texts through the twin lenses of modern theory and the social and economic history of the Middle Ages. The book contains a wealth of suggestive ideas and thought-provoking analyses, and is obviously based on exhaustive reading and many hours of resourceful library work. Readers will find much to admire in its wide-ranging syntheses, its imaginative use of archival material, and its nimble textual readings, while also perhaps wishing for clearer organization and prose style, as well as more coherent and sustained arguments. In an interesting congruence, the book at times feels as if, like the subjects it examines, it too is grappling with the problems of surplus—of lines of inquiry, of variety of texts, of sheer number of ideas. If that surplus sometimes threatens to escape control, it also contains untold nuggets of insight and revelation. With its deep commitment to the

intricate nesting of literary texts in their cultural contexts and to the theorizing of relations between materiality and imaginary structures, this book raises the bar for studies of the social-situatedness of medieval literature and challenges us to do what Vance himself has done—muster our resources to understand that literature's workings.

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FIONA SOMERSET, JILL C. HAVENS, and DERRICK G. PITARD, eds. *Lollards and Their Influence in Late Medieval England.* Woodbridge, Suffolk; and Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell Press, 2003. Pp. x, 344. $85.00.

The editors of this collection are to be complimented on bringing together a fine set of essays from literary scholars and historians on various aspects of the study of Lollardy and Wycliffism. As Fiona Somerset notes in the introduction, there has been "nothing less than an explosion in scholarly activity" (p. 9) since the 1960s on lollard or Wycliffite issues and materials, and the essays gathered here represent new work on various fresh topics by both established and newer scholars. The twelve essays—divided into four sections ("Lollers in the Wind," "Lollard Thought," "Lollards and Their Books," and "Heresy, Dissidence, and Reform")—are prefaced by a thought-provoking piece by Anne Hudson, who raises interesting questions about the philosophical and legal points of view from which heresy might be examined. A brief but valuable survey of the history of Wyclif scholarship from 1384 to 1984 by Geoffrey Martin follows the essays and the volume ends with a "Select Bibliography for Lollard Studies."

The first two essays, those by Wendy Scase and Andrew Cole, take up the issue of naming lollards. As Somerset comments in the Introduction, the general practice in recent scholarship is to use the terms "Wycliffite" and "lollard" interchangeably despite having sometimes been used to distinguish between Wyclif's academic and lay followers (p. 9 n. 1). Both these essays take up the problems of who was calling whom a "lollard" when and whom we, as modern scholars, might discern as "lollards" during the last two decades of the fourteenth century. Scase's