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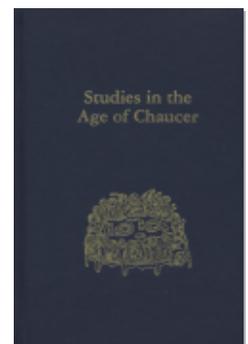
*Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English
Literature* by Emily Steiner (review)

Helen Barr

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Heresies and Errors of the Friars” are the result of “dissident Franciscan presence in England” and have been hitherto “misascribed to the Lollards” (p. 196). Helen Barr seeks to investigate the “Wycliffite Representation of the Third Estate” in an attempt to explain how the Wycliffites came to be associated with civil rebellion in the view of numerous, contemporary commentators, such as Adam Usk, despite the “declaredly orthodox, and even quietist” lollard views on social organization and obedience to secular authority (p. 197). She concludes that while lollard representations of the pious, simple peasant might be read as seditious, it is when Wycliffite texts “argue for the superfluity of the second [estate], or indeed its eradication” that they are closest to the insurgents’ polemic that would refigure the political community by consigning clerics to “the family of Cain” (pp. 215–16, *passim*). Mishtooni Bose’s essay sheds fresh light on the vernacular attempts of Bishop Reginald Pecock’s to construct an orthodox reforming theology in response to Lollardy. Her readings recover Pecock’s work as a worthy object of study and she draws attention to the multigenic and experimental nature of engaging in vernacular theology, where “the literate practices . . . were not defined or controlled exclusively by the clergy” (p. 236).

Somerset, Havens, and Pitard have done us a remarkable service in bringing together this volume, which demonstrates the range of exciting interests currently occupying scholars of Wycliffism. The volume should very quickly come to be seen as bookending securely the nearly two decades of research since the publication of *The Premature Reformation* (1988), and Derrick Pitard deserves unstinting thanks from all those interested in the study of Wycliffism for his herculean efforts in compiling the copious bibliography.

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EMILY STEINER. *Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. xvi, 266. \$60.00.

Emily Steiner argues that the identity of medieval English literary writing was shaped by a “documentary poetics.” There is brief discussion of

Bracton, Deguileville, Margery Kempe, and William Thorpe, but the book focuses chiefly on the Charters of Christ and *Piers Plowman* and its aftermath. Discussion of Bracton's legal theory underpins an examination of how the intriguing Charter of Christ lyrics exploit documentary relations of absence and presence to dramatize the continual availability of the Word made flesh. Writers and illustrators were fascinated with the material form of these charters, as evidenced by the manuscript illustrations reproduced in chapter 2, but Emily Steiner's claim that this materiality enabled medieval writers to come to a self-reflexive understanding of the intricacies of subjectivity, lyric form, and genre seemed to me to be an overreading of the function of legal metaphor.

In a later chapter, Steiner shows how orthodox writers policed these lyrics by inserting an intervening clerical voice in order to make sure that the salvific claims of the Charter were mediated through ecclesiastical authority. More heterodox appropriations of these charters used them both to show the inutility of ecclesiastical documents and to bypass ecclesiastical apparatus. Given this argument, I thought that the later analysis of William Thorpe's trial could be pushed further. To my mind, Thorpe does not simply wrest documentary culture away from the archbishop to preach a sermon, but cunningly demonstrates that material ink, parchment, and rolls stored in cupboards are vain (in both senses of the word) "mannys ordinances" compared to the true sentence that is inscribed in the true believer's heart.

With *Piers Plowman*, Steiner offers an intriguingly bold and original reading of the Pardon scene, arguing that the Pardon should be seen as a "chirographum dei," a charter that promises a new contract for the individual soul. Piers's tearing of the pardon—in two—stresses Steiner, is not a crisis point, but an affirmation of the document through the process of indenture. Piers tears the document in order to witness and confirm its terms. This argument is heavily influenced by Augustine's treatment of the "chirographum dei" in his commentary on Psalm 144.

There are serious problems with this. One of Steiner's foundational statements is that in a document, the symbolic and the functional are inseparable; there is a peculiar and distinctive relationship of textual form to material text. In the Pardon scene, however, the materiality of whatever is sent by Truth (or is it the pope?) is wanting. Steiner's discussion of the "longer" and "shorter" versions immediately shows that no singular document can be witnessed. Will can look over shoulders and see that the "shorter pardon" is composed strictly of two lines. Piers can

tear what Will calls a “bull” and what the priest calls a “pardon,” only then not to be able to find one. For a document truly to be witnessed, surely we need to see its form, as we do later with Moses’ “patente,” where the materiality of parchment, ink, gilt pen, gloss, and seal is stressed? Moreover, if Piers’s tearing indents the document (and it seems a very elevated spiritual responsibility for Piers to hold at this stage in the poem), who keeps the other half? And why is the indenture omitted in C if a document is being ratified, not destroyed in a manner that might chime with the activities of the 1381 rebels?

Steiner’s insistence on the “trenchant materiality” of the documents in *Piers* makes it hard to understand her later argument that Moses and Peace are describing the same document as Truth’s pardon and Hawkyn’s patent (p. 119), and that Truth’s original pardon assumes different guises depending on the context in the poem (p. 120). Different documents are not interchangeable, and this, I think, is more to the point in the pardon scene. Rather than the certainty of reaffirming God’s covenant with human beings, the proliferation of text, voice, and confusion over the material form of the “document,” together with its only very partial visibility and problematic audibility (who is narrating the “longer version”—whose will is being codified?), makes it extraordinarily hard to witness a key document at all. Enigmatic crisis rather than material solution, it seems to me, is what is being dramatized by Langland’s awareness at this moment in the poem, not only of documentary form but also of documentary procedure.

Steiner argues that Langland invented public poetry from the matter of documentary culture, and that the texts that follow on from *Piers* continue this preoccupation, though their practice is differently inflected from Langland’s. The Harley Lyrics need to be factored into this claim and also perhaps *Wynmere and Wastoure*. And while the argument that the free broadcasting of documentary writing is an interesting take on the notion of public writing, I do not think that there was sufficient differentiation between this and bill casting. Moreover, while the 1381 rebel letters borrow some phrases from documents, they are not themselves documents in Steiner’s earlier sense of the term. As with the rather underpowered discussion of the *Book of Margery Kempe*, which was, for reasons I did not understand, exempted from the practice of “documentary poetics,” Steiner could have done much more with *Mum and the Sothsegger*. To read the bag of books sequence as a disclosure of the institutional archives of the realm is interesting, but there is huge vari-

ety in the bag. Are they all “documents”? Should we pay attention to the differences, say, between pamphlets and quittances and ragman rolls, and, if so, why? Also given that documents ought to be stored in official places, what is the significance of the bag’s having been concealed by mitered Mum and his confederates for many years? These were all questions that, given the nature of Steiner’s enterprise, I hoped to find addressed.

In sum, I felt that this book made some large claims that were difficult to sustain, and in other places did not push material as far as it ought to go. There is excessive recapitulation of material that bloats the trajectory of the argument. But while I am in disagreement with many of the arguments and the consistency of the methodology, this is a book that made me think, and indeed to reread in a new light the texts that it examines.

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EMILY STEINER and CANDACE BARRINGTON, eds. *The Letter of the Law: Legal Practice and Literary Production in Medieval England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002. Pp. viii, 257. \$45.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

The Letter of the Law is an unusual collection of essays by diverse hands in that it reads, with few exceptions, almost as if it were a single-authored book on its subject. That is a compliment both to the discipline of the contributors and the management skills of the editors. Indeed, the contributors follow the general theses of one of the editors, Emily Steiner, in her highly regarded book, *Documentary Culture*: vernacular literature calls upon legal discourse to validate its own production. At the same time, vernacular literature also explores the contradictions, interstices, and exceptions ignored in formal legal documents. Literature, that is, both critiques formal legal institutions and proposes its own alternative legal fictions. Such an approach differs from many Law and Literature studies, such as the largely Hegelian enterprise of Theodore Ziolkowski, who reads major shifts in legal practice into key works of literature throughout history, and of the anti-Hegelian enterprise of