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*John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture* by Maura Nolan  
(review)

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*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, Volume 29, 2007, pp. 536-539 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2007.0038>



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him with the omission, he explains, "I have it left for schame, / Be cause I am here oghne prest" (5.1382–83). Nicholson keeps his Venuses separate and here shifts focus, in an interesting but distracting observation arguing that in Genius's denouncing the goddess he serves, "the fiction denies its own reality" (pp. 301–2). At the literal level, however, Genius sees but one goddess and admits to her dual nature: that in turn directs us back to possible conflict in his own "dual allegiance." There is complexity here that Nicholson has not adequately addressed. Finally, he has insisted throughout that love is a site of moral choices, but he appears to deny that when he charges Genius with eventually "stepping outside of his character" (p. 37) to advise Amans to abandon his love. His speech, Nicholson argues, is "a dismissal of everything that precedes" (p. 382). It is hardly that. At a particular site of moral choices, Genius concludes that Amans's choice to persist in his love would be a wrong choice—"it is a Sinne" (8.2088). The judgment does not invalidate the ethics of love Genius has been developing and Nicholson describing, but affirms it through the application.

One may dispute some of Nicholson's premises and readings, then, and yet we must not forget that he has done something not yet attempted on such a scale in Gower studies, and in many ways he has done it well: this book will form a useful "companion" to the *Confessio* not only for its comprehensiveness but also for its organizational clarity as well as its detail in guiding readers through Gower's long and often difficult poem. That Nicholson never shirks introducing major points of controversy, moreover, is commendable. He does not provide answers on every occasion, to be sure, nor will his book assuredly produce "shared understanding," but he has written a work that will do something just as important: newly challenge us to engage in a form of *pley* that Gower appears to have valued—a play of diverse readings.

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MAURA NOLAN. *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. x, 278. \$90.00.

Maura Nolan's book is an ambitious and challenging addition to the reappraisal of John Lydgate's work that began in the 1990s as an ad-

junct to the new historicism and has since taken several directions. Those directions include recent contributions in textual scholarship such as Alexandra Gillespie's *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and Their Books, 1473–1557* and interpretive studies like Nigel Mortimer's *John Lydgate's "Fall of Princes": Narrative Tragedy in Its Literary and Political Contexts*. A larger agenda emerges in Larry Scanlon and James Simpson's essay collection *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England*, which fashions Lydgate's writing as the vast, uncharted territory whose critical mapping is key to a full understanding of Middle English literature. Nolan stakes out a smaller territory by focusing on selected texts from Henry VI's minority—specifically, the *Serpent of Division*, the mummings written for the mercers and goldsmiths, the disguisings at London and Hertford, and Lydgate's retrospective poem on Henry's triumphal entry into London. Historically and politically, her texts represent the decade between Henry V's death at Vincennes in 1422 as he sought to establish the dual monarchy envisioned by the Treaty of Troyes and Henry VI's return to London as King of England and France in 1432, a title already preempted by Charles VII's coronation at Rheims in 1429. In Lydgate's career, these texts are minor works situated between two monuments, *Troy Book* (1412–20), commissioned by Henry V, and *Fall of Princes* (1431–38), commissioned by Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. The claim Nolan makes for them, however, is not at all minor: the texts, she argues, register the crisis of a child ruler and conciliar government, and they remake the available forms of public culture to offer "imaginary and symbolic resolutions to critical cultural problems and contradictions" (p. 3).

One challenge that Nolan implicitly raises is to the category "minor works" within Lydgate's career as a writer. As she rightly notes, scholars regard the period she examines as the high point of Lydgate's influence among his contemporaries, when he writes occasional pieces across multiple genres on both aristocratic and civic commissions. Within the dynamics of Lancastrian cultural exchange, minor work proves to be a hard currency. Nolan is more explicit in her challenging formulation of public culture, the object (and objective) of Lydgate's writerly making in higher and lower genres. The prose, paradramatic, and poetic texts she analyzes are public in the dual sense of commemorating public occasions and appealing to a hierarchical and exclusive audience. The public culture they embody inevitably suggests Habermas's public sphere, but the contrast is more instructive. The "public" Lydgate addresses is not,

as in Habermas, a third term between the state and society, a body of citizens at once private and reflective; if anything, the state and society, particularly its elites, have collapsed into each other. The works of Lydgate's so-called laureate phase command our interest for the ways that power speaks to itself.

A further challenge that Nolan makes is to our expectations and tactics of reading. The public and topical nature of Lydgate's texts leads us to anticipate overtly didactic and exemplary works, rhetorically framed to point a moral or address the philosophical issues beneath public and ceremonial occasions. Nolan insists, however, that Lydgate works against the grain, complicating didacticism and exemplarity with the nuanced, allusive, and resistant discourse that we recognize as distinctly literary. The life of Julius Caesar in *Serpent of Division*, for example, reveals the limitations of moralized history and the failure to integrate human agency and Fortune within a coherent explanation of tragic action. The mummings and disguisings, Nolan demonstrates, are insistently literary in their images and references as well as their invocations of classical and vernacular authorities. Henry VI's entry into London becomes legible as Lydgate's readers draw on the cultural information about the classical past transmitted to them by exempla and sermons. One might want to argue, with Warren Ginsberg in *Chaucer's Italian Tradition*, that for the late Middle Ages a sense of the radical alterity of the past originates with Petrarch and is transmitted by Chaucer, but Nolan stresses the divide between past and present specific to secular exemplarity, for which Gower serves as a powerful model for Lydgate.

Readers looking for a sustained narrative that links Lydgate's writing in 1422–32 to its occasions and historical contexts seek a different kind of literary history from what Nolan undertakes. The empty throne that Paul Strohm has made the informing figure of earlier Lancastrian political anxiety recurs periodically in Nolan's discussion as a reminder after Henry V's death of the trauma of lost heroic kingship and perhaps, too, as an anticipation of Henry VI's later collapses as a reigning monarch. But Henry's minority and the problems of conciliar government do not structure the historical dimension of Nolan's account, nor do they make an ongoing connection between Nolan's principal texts and others related to the events and their themes. Nolan's history lies, rather, in literary form as the vehicle by which historical forces and cultural anxieties break into public consciousness. And literary form implies, in turn, a rich layering of reference and meaning. For this reason, Nolan devotes

considerable attention to both authorial sources and the generic backgrounds of mummings, disguisings, and the triumph. History thus becomes legible through intertextuality as royal, aristocratic, and civic elites, schooled by vernacular learning in particular, recognize the literary framing of exemplary and ceremonial discourse.

Nolan's book reflects wide reading in late medieval literature and culture, at the same time that it insists on bracketing Henry VI's minority as a distinct moment within Lydgate's literary career. Her detailed analysis of the texts suggests that our understanding of Lydgate's career needs to move beyond the taxonomies of major and minor works if we are to understand the full scope of his writing as cultural practice as well as poetic composition. Nolan's book also tells us something about our own moment of critical practice, which, if history depends on literary form and intertextuality, might have already become recognizably post-historicist.

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KELLIE ROBERTSON. *The Laborer's Two Bodies: Labor and the "Work" of the Text in Medieval Britain, 1350–1500*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Pp. ix, 276. \$65.00.

The punning subtitle on the dust-jacket, cited above, differs from the more concise subtitle listed on the book's title page: *Literary and Legal Productions in Britain*. The discrepancy perhaps testifies to the last-minute challenge of selecting just the right brief description for a much-labored-over manuscript. It may also indicate the difficulty of capturing the essence of a complex argument about an unstable term like "work."

Kellie Robertson's study of the "cultural logic" governing both the material discourses of labor law and the symbolic discourses about labor during a historical period (1350–1500) when defining and regulating work were high on the national agenda is a tour de force of medieval cultural studies. This intricately constructed and densely argued book should be read by all interested in late medieval English society, but it has postmedieval implications also, which are indicated in the epilogue about sixteenth-century discussions of labor and in a coda about con-