



PROJECT MUSE®

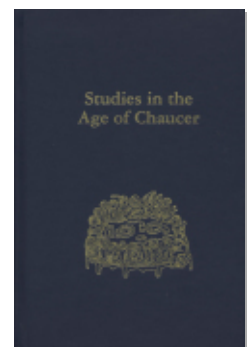
John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England ed.
by Larry Scanlon, James Simpson (review)

Lisa H. Cooper

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 29, 2007, pp. 542-545 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2007.0001>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/587383/summary>

rality play *Mankind* with mid-fifteenth-century East Anglian social unrest, suggesting that both were responses to the 1445–46 regulation of agrarian labor. The densely historical discussion concludes with analysis of how a play may “stage rebellion.” Robertson focuses on “performative” language that (in J. L. Austin’s sense) may be identical to action; the linguistic play and mockery of legalities in *Mankind*, she claims, dramatically reveal the implicit (usually invisible) coercion in familiar juridical situations.

In sum, this is a perspicacious study that will deepen our understanding of late medieval literary and historical references to labor. The theoretical acumen and care with which the book’s arguments are made will certainly generate new insights into familiar texts. As a demonstration of what a cultural studies methodology can bring to medieval studies, *The Laborer’s Two Bodies* is exemplary and can be highly recommended.

KATHLEEN ASHLEY
University of Southern Maine

LARRY SCANLON and JAMES SIMPSON, eds. *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. Pp. 314. \$65.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper.

In the first essay proper in this fascinating and significant volume, Philippa Hardman remarks upon the quality of “connectedness” that characterizes John Lydgate’s verse, the many conjunctions that create the “perceived effect of an unstoppable narrative flow” (pp. 23–24) in the prolix poet’s work. If this reviewer had to pick one way to characterize the overall impression created by the sum of the parts that make up this rich, varied, and critically nuanced collection, it would be in just these same terms of connectedness and flow. Despite the many texts discussed and complex issues raised by eleven contributors, the editors have succeeded in assembling a collection remarkable for the ease—indeed, the seeming inevitability—with which each essay leads to the next. And just as Hardman asks us to look past our stylistic predilections in order to appreciate the function and even the beauty of Lydgate’s seemingly aberrant syntax, so too does this collection ask us to look past the critical predilections that, until very recently, have left Lydgate standing in “the

shadow of Chaucer” (p. 6) in order to appreciate the multiple functions—poetic, social, political—and, yes, the beauty of a much-undervalued and still relatively understudied *corpus*. While this volume is not the only participant in the recent and steadily-expanding effort to firmly reestablish Lydgate’s work as an object fully deserving of serious scholarly attention, it is certainly the most multifaceted and capacious contribution to that effort to date.

In their introduction, Scanlon and Simpson provide an excellent overview not only of the critical misfortunes that have afflicted the study of Lydgate, but also sketch the critical fortunes of the discipline of medieval literary studies. Noting that Lydgate’s work remains “the largest, most underexplored area of Middle English studies,” they suggest that the time has now come to “take Lydgate seriously as a major poet” (p. 6). The most important part of this argument for the shape of the rest of the volume is the observation that Lydgate “often served as the mediating voice between one institution and another” (p. 8). In the essays that follow we often find Lydgate standing in the middle—whether in terms of literal structure (as one who, in Hardman’s terms, “places himself at the center of meaning in the sentence” [p. 21]), or else, more metaphorically, as one positioned between people and prince (Meyer-Lee, Scanlon, Straker, Simpson), commons and nobility (Simpson, Benson, Nolan), cloister and city (Benson, Nolan), visual performance and verbal text (Nolan), medieval and Renaissance (Summit, Copeland), secular and sacred (Somerset, Nisse), and life and death (Nisse).

Hardman’s contribution makes sense of the puzzling mechanics of Lydgate’s style in a way few others have been able. Four subsequent essays pick up in a broader sense on her insistence that Lydgate’s poetics, rather than an impoverished Chaucerianism characterized by a series of blunders, is in fact a calculated stance designed to produce particular effects. Robert J. Meyer-Lee points to the way Lydgate carves out the role of poet-laureate for himself through a deliberate pose of subjection before his declared (but notably dead) master, Geoffrey Chaucer, and shows how Lydgate fashioned the laureate as “the king’s double in the realm of the aesthetic” (p. 52). Larry Scanlon argues for historicizing fifteenth-century poetics so that we see Lydgate’s self-advertised dependence on Chaucer on its own terms rather than through our post-Kantian model of aesthetic originality. Scott-Morgan Straker proffers a valuable critique of the truism that Lydgate wrote propaganda for the Lancastrians; in a careful and revisionary reading of three occasional poems, he

demonstrates that what looks like royalist propaganda may actually be cautionary advice or civic celebration. James Simpson reads a little-studied poem, the *Churl and the Bird*, against the usual critical grain; he shows that while it is a political allegory, an attentive reading uncovers not a reflection of the glories of power, but rather a meditation both on the problems of the poet whose duty it is to speak truth to power as well as on the troubles of those born to carry power's heavy weight upon their shoulders.

With C. David Benson's essay the volume turns from Lydgate's epic and more occasional productions for and about the monarchy to his somewhat more narrowly-focused urban verse. Benson notes that several of Lydgate's short poems do not so much satirize the city as they do those who would undermine its stability. Maura Nolan's essay compares his royal and London mumblings and finds the latter operating in the service of an aspiring merchant class as a vehicle for the display of cultural capital; this contribution is especially compelling for the way it raises pressing theoretical questions about the status of the performed and the read, the oral and the written, in the fifteenth century as well as in our own critical practice. A consideration of critical practice past and present also lies at the heart of the essays by Jennifer Summit and Rita Copeland. Summit reads Humphrey of Gloucester's collection of England's first humanist library and his commission of Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* in tandem to show that these were not only chronologically parallel projects but "mutually dependent productions" (p. 208). Just as the ducal library provided a fictional context (as well as literal content) for the poem, she argues, so did the poem provide an English context for the Italian humanism of the library. Where Summit places the medieval and the early modern in dialogue across the institutional space of the library, Copeland positions them vis-à-vis one another within the longer history of rhetoric.

If there is any complaint one might make about this excellent volume, it is that it gives Lydgate's religious poetry rather short shrift; but, no single volume of essays, however varied its set of approaches or choice of texts, could possibly account for the whole of Lydgate's output. In addition, we might take to heart Fiona Somerset's gently made but trenchant point that the critically accepted divide between Lydgate's secular and sacred verse is at best artificial and at worst a barrier to effective reading. Somerset makes this critique through a skillful analysis of the ideologies that motivated Lydgate's production of *St. Edmund and St.*

Fremund for Henry VI. In the volume's final chapter, Ruth Nisse also considers the intersection of the secular and the sacred, but this time from the perspective of Lydgate's monastic career. Nisse's essay is as neat an ending to this collection as one could wish, since it considers the way that Lydgate considered his own end. Arguing that Lydgate's "later works reveal . . . a growing tension between courtly eloquence and contemplative silence" (p. 282), Nisse sees Lydgate, in his *Testament*, perform a renunciation of politics and poetry that trumps anything Chaucer may have been attempting in his *Retraction*. Nisse points out, however, that it is actually the poet's absence from the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* that has silenced him in a way that little else could; this concluding remark, like this volume as a whole, may serve as a clarion call for John Lydgate's reinstatement not only in medieval studies, but also in our discipline as a whole.

LISA H. COOPER

University of Wisconsin–Madison

JAMES SIMPSON. *The Oxford English Literary History, Volume 2, 1350–1547: Reform and Cultural Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; paperback, 2004. Pp. xviii, 661. \$74.00 cloth, \$35.00 paper.

Such a late review of a book that has already received concentrated attention may seem superfluous, but Oxford's earlier reluctance to part with a copy has hitherto left a gap in the review section of *SAC*. The volume was the subject of the Winter 2005 issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, where an impressive group of experts applauded and took potshots in equal measure, and James Simpson responded unapologetically, conceding some details but insisting on his central thesis. For, unlike many literary histories, this book has a central thesis, though it is disguised by his counter-intuitive definitions of the words in the title. "Reform" means not change for the better, or even change, but multiform; "revolution" not the overthrowing of the old but a unifying process of centralization. The multiformedness is exemplified by the period leading up to the Henrician Reformation, and the Revolution is the Reformation in a new guise. What is at issue is far