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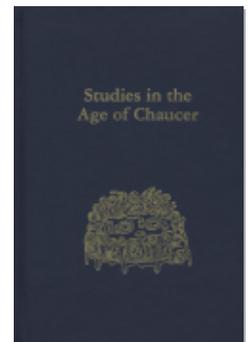
*Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare* by Paul Strohm (review)

Wendy Scase

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retical sophistication of “Textual Subjectivity” was not yet available, and my disagreement with that theory had a different basis.

In fairness, I must quote a disclaimer Spearing makes in a footnote to his chapter on *The Man of Law's Tale*: “My purpose here is not to demonstrate my superiority over these scholars (I must be guilty of at least as many errors), but to argue that failure to achieve perfection is characteristic of human authors, not merely of fictional narrators” (p. 116). To that we may all say, “Amen!”

ALFRED DAVID  
Indiana University

PAUL STROHM. *Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2005. Pp. ix, 298. \$27.50 paper, \$55.00 cloth.

Chaucer and Shakespeare, like parallel mountain ranges, have cast a deep shadow over everything between them. In recent years, critical exploration has discovered that this territory is not uniformly dark and arid. The period's reputation for “dullness” has been revealed as a mask for writing that is anything but dull. Paul Strohm's new volume contributes to the illumination and irrigation of this hidden territory, revealing it to contain fertile ground for critical inquiry. The particular focus of *Politique* is on “mainly vernacular English political texts” (p. 1) and on “performative or action-seeking languages” and “symbolic deeds and events” that “create something new” (p. 9).

*Politique*, the word that gives the book its title, is the focus of the first chapter, “*Politique* Perjury in the *Arrivall* of Edward IV.” *The Historie of the Arrivall of King Edward IV* (usefully reprinted here in an appendix) is an English prose account of the return in 1471 of Edward IV from exile to take the throne again. In Strohm's analysis, *politique* in the *Arrivall* means “shrewd,” “diplomatic,” rather than (as previously) “pertaining to governance”; it is part of an analytical vocabulary that enables the *Arrivall* author to pursue his own and his audience's interests in “calculation and naked self-interest” (p. 44), interests that anticipate those of Shakespeare's histories. Like Henry Bolingbroke, Edward landed at Ravenspur and evaded resistance by maintaining that he only intended

to claim his dukedom. But whereas earlier pro-Lancastrian chroniclers were embarrassed by Bolingbroke's subterfuge, the *Arrivall* author depicts Edward's parallel action as "politically astute behaviour" (p. 32), exemplifying, Strohm claims, a "pre-Machiavellian moment" (p. 35).

In "Lydgate and the Rise of *Pollecie* in the *Mirror* Tradition," Strohm analyses responses to Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* and its genre. The pilgrims' response to Chaucer's *Monk's Tale* has often been used to confirm that misfortune makes tedious narratives (Greg Doran's Royal Shakespeare Company production of the complete *Tales* brilliantly had the Monk recite during the interval; when the audience returns, the Monk is still performing and the pilgrims are asleep). In Strohm's analysis, far from being boring, the genre was "disturbing" for readers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who wished to analyze the practical steps (*pollecie*, now "prudence" as much as "good governance") that they might take to remedy the effects of Fortune. Strohm locates the first signs of the shift of perspective on Fortune in Laurent de Premierfait's version of Boccaccio's text, and in Lydgate's reworking of Laurent. He suggests that an unbroken tradition stretches from Lydgate to the sixteenth century; to the *Mirror for Magistrates*, the updated sequel to Lydgate published in 1559 and 1563, and to Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, part 3.

A chapter on Fortescue and Pecock identifies both as "parcyalle" men who described the state in the language of natural reason and were forced to recant their writings. Fortescue was able to retract his support for the Lancastrians by claiming that his political writings about the Yorkist claim to the throne were shaped by partisan interests. Partisanship and self-interestedness are the dark side, according to Strohm, of the state as described in Fortescue's reasoned analysis. The parallel with Pecock seems a little strained, since in Pecock's writings descriptions of governance and society are figures illustrating his theological arguments rather than his primary focus, and, though there is plenty of evidence that Pecock's prosecution was politically interested—that he had to contend with *parcyalle* men—Strohm does not, I think, provide conclusive evidence that Pecock's opponents represented him as *parcyalle*.

While chapter 3 treats two huge corpora of vernacular prose, chapter 4 focuses on two short political poems, *Balat set upponne the yates of Caunterbury* and *The Holkbam Verses*. Like the *Arrivall*, neither text is particularly well known or easy of access, and Strohm sensibly reprints them in appendices to the chapter. The focus of analysis is on their representa-

tion of a Yorkist king's accession to the throne. Each poem deploys "ideologically charged materials" (liturgy, the royal entry symbolism, prophecy) to attempt to call into existence a political community, with varying success. The *Balat*, dated 1460, anticipates the coming of Richard Duke of York; the Holkham verses, dated 1461, although written after Richard's death and the coronation of his son as Edward IV, still finds the accession of a Yorkist king "unrepresentable."

Chronicle accounts of the death of Richard Duke of York in which Richard's decapitated head is displayed at York wearing a "paper crown" (in earlier texts variously a *carta*, and a circlet made of reeds) are the subject of chapter 5. Tracing accounts of this legend through "Holinshed" to Shakespeare and the seventeenth-century *Eikon Basilike*, Strohm explores how the religious (the Christological reference to the crown of thorns) continues to permeate the realm of secular politics.

Each chapter does service by bringing to attention neglected texts and subjecting them to searching, deeply considered, and highly original analysis. They deserve the serious attention of all literary scholars—and historians—of the period. I have, though, some reservations about the way the material has been structured as a book. The volume is based on Strohm's three Conway Lectures, which he delivered at the University of Notre Dame in 2003, augmented with other material. The volume has been provided with the features of a monograph—an introduction that sets out starting points, questions, and an agenda, a postscript, a glossarial index of vernacular political terminology, and an index—but these elements are in tension with the clear signs of its genesis as separate pieces. In the introduction we are promised that we shall be shown "the beginnings of a new language of politics" (p. 13), "the barest beginnings . . . [of] a separation of the political and religious realms" (p. 16), and "the contours of an emerging fifteenth-century public sphere." These topics are present in the chapters that follow, but there is no overarching thesis, narrative, or theory, such as the Lacanian program that underpins Strohm's book on the earlier fifteenth century, *England's Empty Throne*. Cross-references between chapters are minimal; for example, the chapter on the Yorkist verses recapitulates material on Bolingbroke's perjury without reference to the discussion of this material in the first chapter (p. 184), and the chapter on the paper crown returns to the *Arrivall* and the *Mirror for Magistrates* without properly acknowledging that there has been extensive discussion of these texts in earlier chapters. Notre Dame's series editors may have been better advised not

to try to turn a series of lectures into a monograph, but to have published them as a collection of independent essays. For the chapters of *Politique* are, in the fullest sense, "essays." Individually, they bring into brilliant focus some of the most neglected and little-known texts of the period. Collectively, they illustrate the difficulties future scholars will face when they try to find a compelling framework within which to view this challenging material as a whole.

WENDY SCASE  
University of Birmingham

CAROLYNN VAN DYKE. *Chaucer's Agents: Cause and Representation in Chaucerian Narrative*. Madison and Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005. Pp. 371. \$63.50.

Carolynn Van Dyke justly observes that, although examinations of agency and subjectivity have been productive for Chaucer critics, such studies often slide into generalizations or vaguely psychoanalytic interpretations of either character or author. She sets out to redress this problem by synthesizing a concept of agency from a stimulating variety of critical contexts, including literary theory, philosophy, computer science, legal studies, social sciences, and business (no doubt relying partly on her own varied experience as a scholar of computer science as well as literary studies). Agency, as Van Dyke conceives it, "need not be human, social, or even animate" (p. 17), nor does it need to be intentional or autonomous. Ultimately, however, this definition of agency is so capacious that it becomes less rather than more useful. While it does allow consideration of an array of unusual agents, this inclusive notion of agency is difficult to pin down in any meaningfully specific way and, as a result, exercises of agency often escape detailed examination. Van Dyke's individual readings tend to focus instead on Chaucer's multivalent characterizations of various agents.

The first chapter establishes this definition of agency and examines its theoretical and historical contexts. Van Dyke identifies several crises of agency in late medieval culture, including divisions of power within spiritual and secular hierarchies, the philosophical debate between Scholastic Realism and Nominalism, and conflicting ideas about authorship