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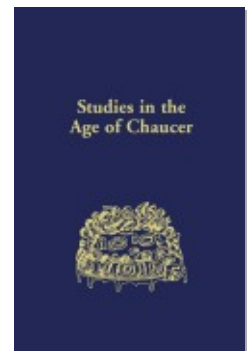
Middle English Prose: A Critical Guide to Major Authors and Genres ed. by A. S. G. Edwards (review)

A. J. Colaianne

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The concluding essay, "Poetics and Style in Late Medieval Literature" (pp. 263–93), by the editor of the collection, examines the conception of the poet toward himself and toward his work as this can be seen in Lydgate, James I, Henryson, Dunbar, Douglas, Hawes, and Skelton, and shows how the attitude toward "high style" changed through the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For this reader this interesting study would have been more useful still if similar works and writers from the Continent had been incorporated into it.

Altogether, then, we have a group of studies touching on various topics of interest to many students of the literature of the Middle Ages. A side benefit to the insights and elucidations presented is that they are representative of the varied approaches and interests existing in medieval circles today. There is something here for most medievalists, but all that is here will probably not be for all of them.

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A.S.G. EDWARDS, ed. *Middle English Prose: A Critical Guide to Major Authors and Genres*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984. Pp. xi, 452. \$50.00.

In his own essay in this volume, Editor A.S.G. Edwards refers to these "thesis-hungry times"—that is, the present age, with its emphasis on finding new things to publish. It seems that feeding the thesis-hungry is an all-too-important mission in this otherwise useful collection of eighteen bibliographical review essays on Middle English prose. Though they differ greatly in organization (even in the use of formal subdivisions), in coverage, and sometimes even in intention, each essay offers up a rich banquet of desiderata. We are told, for example, that, as yet, "there is no comprehensive approach to Rolle's thought" and that much work remains on "Rolleana;" that in studies of Walter Hilton and the *Cloud of Unknowing* we have done much and "other gaps are in the process of being filled;" that there is a need for someone to explore "the influence of Wycliffite writings on fifteenth-century prose;" that someone should undertake a careful study of the diagrams in manuscripts of the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*.

Some of the suggestions for new studies and new editions do not appear to be at all out of order—someone *should*, for example, assess Rolle's contributions to English vocabulary. But when every essay calls for a reassessment here, a "rethinking" there, the cumulative effect is unsettling. Why so many "calls?" Is it simply to help one locate a dissertation or thesis topic for one's students (or for one's self) or is it to stimulate the understanding and appreciation of some important Middle English texts? Whatever the reason, the authors of these essays and their readers should take a long, hard look at a scholarly economy that can hardly bear the oppressive weight of yearly contributions to our "understanding." In a sense, the maddening refrain of desiderata is at cross-purposes with the bibliographical purpose of this volume. A bibliographical review essay should be designed to help the researcher understand the shape of previous commentary on a subject. It is retrospective bibliography of the most useful kind—first, it is actually readable (unlike an enumerative or annotated bibliography that is usually consulted for purposes of reference only); second, it assesses the value of what has been published; most important, it provides a measure of order by grouping studies of similar topics and by highlighting evolving critical and scholarly controversies. Spotting the "gaps" in commentary puts the emphasis in the wrong place altogether—on what has not yet been said.

But the emphasis on future directions over retrospective assessment is not the most serious problem in this collection. Far more important is the unevenness of the bibliographical coverage itself. Some of this is to be expected in a collection by eighteen hands on eighteen very different subjects. But one must question the usefulness of editorial guidelines flexible enough to allow one author the freedom to write an argumentative essay on his subject, with reference to only selected commentary relevant to the argument, while another undertakes a more-or-less exhaustive review of the scholarship and criticism. Each bibliographical essay provides an overview of the most important commentary and a selective bibliography of primary texts (including, in many cases, manuscript materials as well as printed editions), and a selective checklist of secondary scholarship. There are, however, significant variations in both the bibliographical coverage and the format of the essays. For example, subheadings are used to classify materials in some of the essays, but are entirely absent in others. In some cases, reliable bibliographical work has already been done and it is wisely not duplicated; but there are some notable exceptions—for example, the valuable Lagorio and Bradley bibliography on the English mystics is barely

acknowledged in the essays on the mystics. In the current argot, one might say that this reference guide is not "user friendly." Variations in organization and scope make it difficult for the researcher to find a specific topic or relevant bibliographical citation. The reason for the editor's decision to avoid standardizing the format is understandable enough. Each essay has a very different kind of subject: for some, the works of a single author; for others, a miscellany of works grouped according to subject (medical prose) or rhetorical form (the sermon).

Despite these shortcomings, this book is quite useful. It contains a wealth of important information available nowhere else in such a convenient and accessible form. It is a readable bibliographical companion to a diverse body of Middle English prose, including *The Ancrene Riwe*, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and *The Scale of Perfection*; the works of Richard Rolle, Nicholas Love, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Sir John Mandeville, and John Trevisa; the prose works of Chaucer and the editions and translations of William Caxton.

As might be expected, the most valuable essays deal with subjects that are not covered elsewhere (for example, Laurel Braswell's essay on Utilitarian and Scientific Prose, for which the section of the revised Wells's *Manual* has not yet appeared); the less useful essays include those whose subjects are well covered in the *Manual* and in other reference works (the *Ancrene Riwe*, for example).

A few of these reviews should be singled out for special praise. Christina Von Nolcken's essay on Julian of Norwich is not only well written, interesting, and informative, it is also suitable as an introduction to Julian for the general student who has little or no background in the study of Middle English. (On the other hand, Alastair Minnis's essay on *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the *Scale of Perfection* is intended for the specialist who is already familiar with both the primary texts and the major strains of commentary. It's hard to imagine that this essay and Von Nolcken's are intended for the same audience.) The most informative and useful of the essays are those which examine broad categories of Middle English prose: Sermon Literature (Thomas J. Heffernan), Historical Prose (Lister M. Matheson), Wycliffite Prose (Anne Hudson), The Romances (George R. Keiser), Medical Prose (Linda Ehrsam Voigts), Works of Religious Instruction (Alexandra Barratt). As these titles suggest, taxonomic problems abound in the division of primary materials. It is to the credit of the editor and the contributors that overlapping treatments are kept to a minimum.

Ralph Hanna's "Mandeville" is an exemplary bibliographical essay. Professor Hanna devotes a good deal of his discussion to unravelling the textual problems of the *Travels* and to a review of the question of the work's genre. Hanna's desiderata for studies of the *Travels* are direct and unambiguous and stand in sharp contrast to the vague "reassessments" called for in most of the other essays. His primary bibliography is a trim and succinct addendum which notes only omissions in and corrections to of the bibliographies of Seymour and Bennett.

In his essay "Scholarship and Culture" (*Atlantic Monthly*, November 1984) Jacques Barzun comments that, these days, "Reference books are as numerous as real books—manuals, digests, and dictionaries on every subject, which deliver information in capsule form." *Middle English Prose* is a reference book *and* a real book. While it is not a "succinct, comprehensive reference guide," as the preface claims, it will be a most useful addition to the medievalist's library.

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JOHN H. FISHER, MALCOLM RICHARDSON, and JANE L. FISHER, *An Anthology of Chancery English*. Knoxville, Tenn.: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984. Pp. xvii, 416. \$49.50.

For nearly a decade John Fisher and his students have been studying the relationship between the increased use of English in government correspondence during the first half of the fifteenth century and the development of a standard written dialect of English. The latest installment in what has become an impressive body of scholarship on Chancery English is the first substantial collection of the primary materials that have been the object of their study. Most of the 241 documents in the collection date from the period 1417-1455, and all but 70 of them are printed here for the first time.

The detailed commentary on the documents (pp. 3-51) gives special attention to the organization and personnel of the government bureau-