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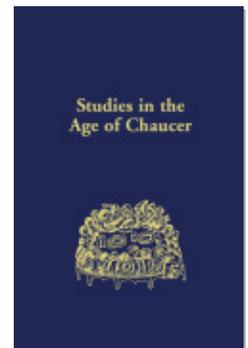
*Individuality and Achievement in Middle English Poetry* ed.  
by O. S. Pickering (review)

John W. Conlee

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teachers, and of foster parents (the latter are mentioned here mostly in connection with the sagas, but occur in many other forms of literature too). The editors point out that most of the information available about mothering comes, inevitably, from male writers, but there are some female sources who are not tapped here, such as Christine de Pizan. We might also ask what and where are the gaps between aristocratic and nonaristocratic mothering; very little is said here about life outside courts and noble households. These essays vary considerably in quality, but the topic is a rich one; it is to be hoped that the appearance of this volume will prompt further studies of medieval mothering, both literary and historical.

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O. S. PICKERING, ed. *Individuality and Achievement in Middle English Poetry*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997. Pp. xi, 227. \$71.00.

In his preface, O. S. Pickering remarks that “the influence of a 1960s English department dies hard,” and this collection of critical essays certainly does reflect many of the formalist approaches that dominated medieval criticism during the 1960s and 70s. Indeed, one of the explicit purposes of this collection is to counterbalance “the recent growth of theoretical, socio-historical and bibliographical approaches to the study of Middle English literature [that] has led to a decline in the amount of literary appreciation, and to the neglect . . . of poets who are not at the centre of the present-day taught canon.” The volume contains twelve essays, five on ME lyric poetry (broadly defined), three on ME drama, and four dealing with longer narrative works. They are arranged roughly in chronological order, with each essay focusing on a distinctive aspect of a particular work or a small cluster of works.

In the first of the several essays on lyric poetry, Karl Reichl proposes that the apparent simplicity of many early Middle English secular lyrics—a simplicity suggestive of popular songs—actually belies the writers’ conscious and sophisticated imitation of such works. Reichl believes, however, that some of the lyrics in MS Rawlinson D.913 come close to being true reflections of folk poetry, and he cites “Maiden in the mor lay” as an example. On the whole Reichl’s argument is persuasive,

though the connection he attempts to establish between “Maiden in the mor lay” and certain Portuguese and Spanish ballads seems more tenuous.

In his own contribution to the collection, Oliver Pickering comments on the distinctive stylistic features shared by a small group of fourteenth-century religious poems, and suggests the possibility of their common authorship. The most essential feature of this group, he finds, is the use of concentrated visual images not unlike those that occur in seventeenth-century “metaphysical poetry.” Pickering refers to four of these poems—the “Dispute between Mary and the Cross” being the best known—as the *Dispute* group, and he associates them with other somewhat similar poems—e.g., *The Devils’ Parliament* and Richard Maidstone’s translation of the seven penitential psalms. This larger group of poems, Pickering believes, reflects a tradition of religious poetry “distinguished by compressed argument and daring image.” In another article on Middle English religious lyrics, Julia Boffey discusses the lyric strategies that underlie many late-medieval religious lyrics such as those found in Balliol College MS 354 (Richard Hill’s MS). Boffey shows how these poems manage to encapsulate subject matter that “is amenable to much more capacious exposition, and to find ways of making it arresting and memorable.” Her essay also deals with *titulus*-verses—poems written to accompany wall paintings or other visual images—and on the relationship between *pictura* and *litteratura*. Her discussion of Lydgate’s *Testament* and the series of carved wooden plaques in Holy Trinity Church at Long Melford is particularly compelling.

In his discussion of *The Simonie*, Derek Pearsall considers the ways in which this powerful poem of complaint against the times is like and unlike other works belonging to this genre of satiric poetry. Pearsall believes that *The Simonie* is not a poem in which the depiction of social corruption is for the purpose of initiating reform; rather, it is the expression of a vision of the world in which the flourishing of evil stems from God’s plan for the punishment of sinners. As a result, Pearsall argues, the poem has a timelessness that makes attempts to historicize it largely irrelevant.

Thorlac Turville-Petre’s essay examines “Ne mai no lewed lued,” one of the poems in MS Harley 2253 that concerns a very specific contemporary situation. (This is one of the several poems on social, political, or historical topics in the Harley MS, as Turville-Petre points out, that is *not* to be found in G. L. Brook’s *The Harley Lyrics*, the standard

edition of the English poems.) The speaker in the poem has been summoned to the ecclesiastical court because he has gotten a young woman pregnant and she is insisting that he wed her—something he is not eager to do. The situation is further complicated by a second woman who also claims he has contracted to marry *her*. Turville-Petre shows how any initial sympathy we might have for the young man “is dissipated little by little, and when it comes to the sentence imposed upon him, to be whipped like a dog at the church . . . and then to be married off by a priest, it seems little more than he deserves.”

The longer works discussed in the collection include the *Owl and the Nightingale*, *St. Erkenwald*, and *The Siege of Jerusalem*. David Lawton's discussion of hunting and hawking in the *Siege of Jerusalem* analyzes the specific use of this topos in the *Siege* and also relates it to other alliterative poems in which hunting and hawking figure prominently. Lawton's interesting discussion makes one look forward to the forthcoming edition of *The Siege of Jerusalem*, a work that—due to its stark portrayal of violence against the Jews—“even its editors cannot love.” Alexandra Barratt focuses on “Avian Self-Fashioning and Self-Doubt” in the *Owl and the Nightingale*, demonstrating the ways in which this pair of avian debaters are “seething masses of neurotic insecurity.” Although I can't agree with her that the poem's humor has been largely ignored by recent commentators, Barratt couldn't be more right in her basic contention that the *Owl and the Nightingale* “is a very funny poem which deserves to be more widely read.” John Burrow, in his brief essay on *St. Erkenwald*, considers the effect of the poet's intentional employment of redundancy at strategic moments in the poem: “[T]he *Erkenwald* poet can, at his best, achieve a texture in which traditional redundancies of alliterative verse—alliteration itself, ‘formulae’, ‘variation’—play a full part in what is at the same time densely expressive poetic writing.”

The final three essays in the collection concern Middle English drama. Myra Stokes discusses the Wakefield Master's masterful “studies in human nastiness,” proving him to be “an expert pathologist of anger and ill-will.” She explores this aspect of his dramatic art in all six of the plays attributed to him, beginning with the *Mactatio Abel*, the one play not written in his trademark stanza. In his discussion of the N-Town *Mary Play*, Peter Meredith offers an interesting variety of observations and speculations about an actor's use of “connyng,” “personne” and “voice,”

and about the social contexts in which the play might have been performed. Avril Henry, finally, calls attention to the dramatist's use of unusual rhymes at important moments in *The Castle of Perseverance*, and concludes that it "is not certain whether rhyme-variation in the play reflects extreme sensitivity or ear in the medieval audience, or a craftsman's private delight, or devotional decoration for the glory of God, or simply flamboyant contemporary taste."

All in all, this is a very appealing collection of essays, partly because it is so refreshingly old-fashioned, but even more so because it calls to our attention a wonderful array of lesser-known works that are very deserving of attention. A pair of the essays have as their principal concern two such works—*The Simonie* and "Ne mai no lewed lued"—and in most of the other discussions our attention is drawn to many intriguing but relatively obscure poems, such as "The Festivals of the Church" (*Index* 3415), which contains among other things a stanza on Christ's circumcision; or the lyric poem that warns worldly girls of their mortality, found in MS Harley 116 (*Index* 2136); or Lydgate's *Testament* (*Index* 2464), a poem written late in his life in which he laments his mis-spent youth. What this group of essays does, finally, is to remind us of the many notable Middle English poems that we rarely have a chance to consider and that we even more rarely have a chance to incorporate into our teaching.

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SANDRA PIERSON PRIOR. *The Fayre Formez of the Pearl Poet*. Medieval Texts and Studies, vol. 18. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996. Pp. xiv, 222. \$37.95.

This is a fine book of formalist New Criticism of the four well-known Middle English poems—*Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—assigned to the anonymous *Pearl*-poet of the fourteenth century. The major strength of the book is not only in what it says about these poems especially in the context of ecclesiastical iconography, illustrating the adage *ut pictura poesis*, but also in what it does by