

Boffey, Julia, and A. S. G. Edwards, eds. 2023. *The Oxford History of Poetry in English. Volume 3. Medieval Poetry: 1400–1500.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. xiv + 566. ISBN 9780198839682.

Reviewed by Michael Johnston
Purdue University

This volume, gathering essays from 26 scholars, forms Volume 3 of the Oxford History of Poetry in English series. The contributors represent a broad diversity—in terms of the authors’ geographical location, seniority within the field, and critical approaches. The editors are to be applauded for achieving a balance of genders, as well as for not limiting themselves to scholars whose approaches mirror their own. Commendably, Boffey and Edwards also did not limit their invitations to those at Oxbridge or Ivy League universities, but rather included those from a breadth of academic institutions, each of whom had something of substance to offer. The result is a volume that—if read cover to cover—carefully illuminates the complex topography of fifteenth-century English poetry. Overall, this is a well-conceived and learned collection that would repay any scholar’s time invested in reading it. But given that there are 28 chapters in this volume, limitations of space will quite obviously preclude a reviewer from even mentioning each of the chapters. Instead, in what follows, I will discuss some of what I see as the broad trends across these essays, homing in on a few key examples that can illustrate my more general observations.

First, however, a few awkwardnesses/limitations—none of them debilitating, and none of them necessarily the sort of thing an editor could avoid—stood out. First, the specter of Chaucer hangs over this entire volume, but given that Chaucer died on the cusp of the fifteenth century, his poetry does not receive its own chapter in this volume. (For that, one needs to consult chapters by Barry Windeatt and David Lawton in volume 2 of the series). But many of the chapters discuss, at length, various poets’ indebtedness to Chaucer, and thus one is left feeling like this volume is a commentary on an absent author. Second, the footnotes were (at least to the mind of this reviewer) quite spartan. Given that this volume is intended as a broad overview for students and scholars, more guidance on where to follow up on particular arguments or observations would have been welcome. Many similar sorts of volumes have sections devoted to “Further Reading,” which, if the press allowed it, would have been most welcome here. I noted that very few footnotes contain references to more than two secondary sources. (This economizing may well have arisen from a dictate posed by the series itself, in which case it could not be helped). As but one example, I found myself quite taken with Jane Griffiths’s remark that Caxton and de Worde were “attempting to work out, in practice, what an English press might be for: transmission of the vernacular heritage in the form of Chaucer’s and Lydgate’s works, or in the form of popular romance; production of explicitly useful works such as grammatical and mathematical treatises; circulation of polemic; perhaps even publication of editions to rival those classical texts—or all of the above” (482). This is a provocative line of thought, gesturing to the comprehensive aims of England’s earliest

printers, and I found myself wanting to know where I could find more about this, but Griffiths is only able to point us towards two monographic studies (fn. 7), when, no doubt, there is a vast, rich and contested body of scholarship speaking to this issue. Finally—and perhaps this is a bit peevish/pedantic of me—I noted at least three non-standard forms of the yogh employed across various essays (e.g., 225, 313, 397).

What most stood out to me in reading across this vast and diverse series of essays is how much I—and presumably any scholar, from the seasoned veteran to the aspiring graduate student—had to learn about fifteenth-century English poetry. That is, I imagine that there is not a scholar who would not stand to gain a lot from this collection, so comprehensive is its scope and so learned are its contributions. I would single out three essays, in particular, from which I learned the most. First is Takami Matsuda’s “Biblical Paraphrase and Poems of Religious Instruction” (Chapter 11), which demonstrates how pervasive the influence of Peter Comestor was upon Middle English verse paraphrases of the Bible (161–63), and how frequently the Penitential Psalms and Job inspired Middle English versification (163–65). The sheer vitality of this tradition was entirely surprising to me. Likewise, I learned a lot from Ben Parsons’s “Popular Tales” (Chapter 22). Parsons demonstrates that, although such tales in Middle English were diffuse and never achieved canonical status, they had a remarkably long shelf life and were still “read as pieces of entertainment rather than objects of purely antiquarian interest” into the eighteenth century (371). Many of the tales that Parsons discusses were familiar to me, but having them gathered together into a single chapter powerfully illuminated just how dynamic this type of poetry was. But Parsons also usefully drew my attention to numerous texts I had not encountered before, including a series of comic responses to various *Canterbury Tales*, which I intend to incorporate in class the next time I teach Chaucer (372–73). Finally, I would single out Helen Phillips’s “Occasional Poetry, Popular Poetry, and the Robin Hood Tradition” (Chapter 23) for the strikingly diverse range of texts it discusses.

I would single out Robert Meyer-Lee’s “Authorship” (Chapter 7) as an absolute tour-de-force introduction to the complexity of fifteenth-century authors’ approaches to their own literary authority. Meyer-Lee contends that most recent literary histories tend to focus on ideas and themes more than the output of individual authors, a tendency largely attributable to Foucault’s and Barthes’s theoretical interventions. But, as Meyer-Lee notes, such a critical move happily coincides with medieval ideas of authorship, which was often conceived in “textual and institutional terms . . . Moreover, in a manuscript culture, authorship was in practice no singular creative event but, quite saliently to everyone involved, a dispersed activity of an array of temporally and spatially distributed agents” (92). At the same time, Meyer-Lee complicates the postmodern-premodern conjunction by showing how frequently late medieval texts went out of their way to depict authors at work. The fifteenth century is marked by a particularly concentrated interest in authorial self-presentation, which Meyer-Lee terms “textualized performances or authorial poses” (100), an effect that emanated from even the most sacerdotal of Middle English poets.

An interesting tension within most such comprehensive overview volumes emerges from conflicting purposes animating various contributors. In this vein, some authors in this volume approached their essays as a form of *vade mecum*, giving an overview of what preceding scholars have said about their topic and sticking to widely agreed-upon facts. If these authors have their own critical agendas, they tend to sit on their hands and leave

such for another venue. Yet other authors in this collection were more comfortable pivoting from the “state of the field” to their own novel interpretations, pressing a comparatively stronger argument. Both approaches are certainly useful, but for those considering this volume, it is worth being aware of this tension in advance. On the vade mecum side of the ledger, I would account Eric Weiskott’s “Verse Forms and Prosody” (Chapter 6), Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards’s “Poetic Manuscripts” (Chapter 8), A. S. G. Edwards’s “Science and Information” (Chapter 15), Matthew Giancarlo’s “Conduct Poetry” (Chapter 16), Andrew Galloway’s “Chronicle and History” (Chapter 18), and Aisling Byrne’s “Fictions of Britain” (Chapter 20). Edwards, in particular, declaims that his contribution “is very much an outline” (238).

Those who interpreted a stronger argumentative remit include James Simpson’s “Literary Traditions: Continuity and Change” (Chapter 3), which posits three fourteenth-century literary traditions as casting a long shadow over the fifteenth century. Simpson points to Gower’s works, the *Piers Plowman* tradition, and alliterative historical poetry as alternatives to the predominantly Chaucerian fifteenth century. Likewise, Tamara Atkin’s “The Poetry of Religious and Moral Drama” (Chapter 14) argues that, in spite of their often surviving in post-medieval copies, “the surviving corpus of medieval drama should be understood as primarily a fifteenth-century cultural phenomenon” (214). But she also registers the argument that these texts merit consideration vis-à-vis form: quite simply, they “should be read as poetry” (214). In so doing, Atkin lodges objections against scholars, like Derek Pearsall and Matthew Sergi, who dismiss drama on the aesthetic level. As a final example, I would point to Rory Critten’s “Love Visions and Love Poetry” (Chapter 17), which invokes C. S. Lewis’s argument that poetry of the fifteenth century attempted to resolve the tensions between love and duty that marked the earlier poetry of the High Middle Ages. Critten concurs with Lewis but argues that the landscape is more complex yet. As Critten nicely demonstrates, in addition to such an attempted resolution, the poetry of this period now begins to foreground female desire in previously unseen ways, and even begins to introduce—if obliquely—same-sex desire. All three of these pieces were well articulated and convincing.

An authoritative volume like this, especially one within this series, and more especially one bearing the imprimatur of Oxford University Press, cannot help but participate in canon formation. The array of chapters itself, by what it includes and what it omits, implicitly engages in such a process. Fortunately, this volume errs on the side of maximum inclusivity, welcoming all types of verse texts, and its range of chapters is admirably comprehensive. Truth be told, there is not a major type or category of Middle English poetry that seems to have been omitted. Part III of this volume, “Topics and Genres,” ranges across hagiography, lyrics, carols, drama, scientific texts, conduct poetry, love poetry, history, romance, and popular poetry, which leaves little undiscussed.

But canon formation explicitly comes to the fore in Part IV, “Poets,” which has a chapter each on John Lydgate (Chapter 24, by Robert R. Edwards), Thomas Hoccleve (Chapter 25, by Sebastian Langdell), Robert Henryson (Chapter 26, by Joanna Martin), and William Dunbar (Chapter 27, by Pamela M. King). All four were insightful, informative examinations of their subject, but why these four? If popularity as judged by the survival of fifteenth-century manuscripts is the key determining factor, then Lydgate and Hoccleve would certainly belong here, but Henryson and Dunbar would not. If formal inventiveness or ingenuity is the determining factor, then arguably Audley

deserves a chapter before Lydgate does. An argument could equally be mounted for giving a single-author chapter to George Ashby, John Capgrave, Charles d'Orléans, Osborn Bokenham, and even the late poetry of John Gower or the early poetry of John Skelton. Ashby, Capgrave et al. are treated in detail elsewhere in the volume, scattered across various chapters, but beyond the editors' remark in the "Introduction" that Lydgate, Hoccleve, Henryson and Dunbar are "especially important poets" (10), it never became quite clear to me why they, in particular, were singled out for special treatment.

Another provocative tension within this volume lies between historicism and formalism. Many of the authors approached their subject through a broadly historicist lens, reflecting on how the texts within their remit engaged with the politics and ideology of fifteenth-century English culture. Yet others tacked more towards formal analyses of their texts. Such is, of course, a polarity endemic to all literary study, so it is not surprising to find it at play here in this volume. One presumes that those contributors whose own scholarship operates in an historicist or formalist vein simply imported their preferred methodologies to their contributions here. This contrast stood out most clearly in Part IV, "Poets," which gives us a largely historicist Lydgate and Hoccleve and a largely formalist Henryson and Dunbar. Robert R. Edwards, for example, discusses Lydgate's works chronologically, across his career, pegging various poems to changes in the political landscape and Lydgate's own relationship to his powerful patrons, explicitly substituting the historicist for the formalist approach that has, hitherto, tended to dismiss Lydgate: "If on earlier appraisals Lydgate falls short of Chaucer's powers of characterization, description, wit, and voicing, we are in a position now to approach his poems for what they seek to accomplish, which is to establish the authority of clerical culture in the public arenas of Lancastrian England" (408). Sebastian Langdell, for his part, gives us a Hoccleve who, among many things, responds to the religious upheavals of his day. By contrast, Joanna Martin highlights how Henryson envisioned his poetry yoking eloquence to morality to help us "pacify our wilful desires" (442). She pays particular attention to Henryson's form and style. Likewise, Pamela King shows William Dunbar as a writer highly invested in poetic form, reflected most obviously in the remarkable generic range of his poetic output. King's commitments to recovering the formal nuances of Dunbar's poetry are revealed most clearly in the final words of her essay:

Dunbar's poetry performs itself through genre manipulation, through rhetorical flourish, through its signature aureation. Its meta-textual and ekphrastic turns are saved from an in-growing logocentricity by its compelling exchange not with reality but with the contemporary performing arts. (478)

Of course, as this volume's series title would have it, the focus is exclusively verse and not prose. The logic of such a series, when looking over the entirety of English literary history, makes good sense. As I understand the work of my colleagues from later periods, those who research Pound and Eliot tend not to work on Joyce and Woolf. But such is not the case in Middle English. Many of us do indeed end up specializing exclusively in verse or prose, but that is typically an effect of what form the texts of our chosen genre tended to assume and is rarely because we selected a specialization in either verse or prose. Some medievalists, that is, focus on romance, and thus tend to study texts in verse. Others might work on homilies, and thus will focus on prose. And yet others, who might, for example, work on religious literature, will necessarily have to work across both prose

and verse. So as a result of being shoehorned into this series' exclusive focus on verse, this volume creates a divide that does not exist in the scholarly world of medieval studies.

Another effect of a volume like this is to isolate the fifteenth century as a self-contained literary period. In many ways, this makes sense, given that the opening of the fifteenth century coincides with the death of Chaucer, the great spread of Wycliffite thought and the attendant ecclesiastical response, the Lancastrian usurpation, and a marked growth of the vernacular, while the end coincides with the Tudor dynasty and the English Reformation. Yet, at the same time, by zeroing in on fifteenth-century authors and their fifteenth-century creations, this volume inscribes a literary history based more on ideas than on the material reality of readers. As William St Clair argued so cogently in *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, what we know as the Victorian literary period was the time when, from the vantage point of readers, our great Romantic poets were actually being read, while readers in the age when Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats produced their masterpieces were actually more invested in reading Goldsmith. To construct literary history around authors, and not reception history, distorts the way literature worked in the hands of its readers. It is, in short, to substitute an idealist history for a materialist one. Such questions could certainly be asked of this volume, for wasn't the fifteenth century really the age of Chaucer, Gower, and Langland?

In conclusion, I want to stress that none of these reflections is meant as a substantive critique of this volume, for I have no such critiques to level. This is a volume of great gravitas and heft, and I would recommend it to anyone with interests in fifteenth-century English poetry. In particular, this volume merits a place on exam lists for graduate students, and individual chapters could profitably be excised for use in an upper-level undergraduate seminar. Instead, I offer these thoughts about the methodological issues raised by such a volume in the spirit of an engaged response. Any attempt to delimit and then discuss the poetry of any period is bound to provoke questions of methodology, canon formation, and periodization. Such is certainly the case with this eminent addition to the Oxford History of Poetry in English.

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