

**Cooper, Helen, and Robert R. Edwards, eds. 2023. *The Oxford History of Poetry in English. Volume 2. Medieval Poetry: 1100–1400*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. xxiii + 523. ISBN 9780198827429.**

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This is the second volume in a projected 14-volume series by OUP, which was initiated by the publication, in 2022, of volume 4, *Sixteenth-Century British Poetry*. The series as a whole, which goes by the acronym *OHOPE*, is promoted as being “designed to offer a fresh, multi-voiced, and comprehensive analysis of ‘poetry’ [*sic*]: from Anglo-Saxon culture through contemporary British, Irish, American, and Global culture” (iv). The medieval period is to be treated in three volumes. Volume 1 (as yet unpublished) will cover the earliest poetry from c. 670 to 1100; Volume 2 (the subject of this review), deals with the three centuries of the high Middle Ages; and Volume 3 (also published in 2023) examines poetry of the fifteenth century. Volumes 9 and 12–14 are planned to bring the series into the present day in Britain, Ireland, America, Canada, Australasia, Oceania, Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, with volumes 10 and 11 covering American poetry from “first encounters” to 1939. To describe the series as a whole as a project of ambitious scope would be a palpable understatement.

The present volume consists of an Introduction (chapter 1) and 28 chapters, arranged into five parts: (I) Contexts (chapters 2–4), (II) Literary Culture (chapters 5–10), (III) “Materie” (that is, topics: chapters 11–15), (IV) Genre Poetics (chapters 16–23), and (V) The Ricardian Poets (chapters 24–29), including Langland or, rather, *Piers Plowman*, the *Gawain*-Poet, Gower, and Chaucer, who has two chapters devoted to his works. In addition to the two editors, there are 27 expert contributors, who were requested to be “selective and incisive rather than comprehensive” in their essays (2). Even so, the volume contains some suitably expansive assessments, such as the opening overview of the historical and political context by Laura Ashe; Ralph Hanna’s appraisal of “Poetic Sites” (the largely regional and local geography of English writings); and the closing essay by Julia Boffey on the “Reception of the Middle English Poetic Tradition,” which in many ways sets the scene for Volume 3 in this series, edited by Boffey herself and A. S. G. Edwards (see the review by Michael Johnston in this issue). Equally wide-ranging while remaining admirably condensed is Ad Putter’s overview of “Verse Forms” (chapter 9).

The purposive focus on poetry sets this volume apart from other extensive studies of the period, such as *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English* (2010), which encompasses, *inter alia*, religious and secular drama, and the prose writings of women visionaries. Many chapters in this *Oxford History of Poetry in English* tend to be broadly thematic in focus (for example, “Doctrine and Learning,” “Non-Cyclic Romances of Love,” chapters 13, 19), and this can lead to some duplication of subject matter, specifically in analyses of texts and authors from different perspectives. Wace, for example, is treated in six separate chapters (2, 4, 7, 9, 10 and 11), and “Winnere and

Wastour” in four (3, 12, 13 and 20). Such multiplicity of perspectives may in many ways be considered a virtue of the approach adopted in this volume.

Perhaps surprisingly, the Alliterative Revival is not given a chapter of its own, but this is justified by the observation that “alliteration has an extensive historical and regional span and so has a place in a range of chapters within this volume” (4). There is also no chapter on female authorship, which the editors acknowledge early in their Introduction by stating that “the place of gender within the history of poetry in this period remains prominent but unresolved.” As they explain, “there is no direct evidence of women as poets in English, despite their considerable influence as patrons and readers” (2). Although the trilingual nature of written culture in England after the Norman Conquest is given due recognition by separate chapters on Anglo-Latin, Anglo-French, and Welsh (chapters 5–7), the editors are at pains to emphasise that “this is a history of poetry in *English*, not of poetry in England” (1).

Some variability of register is probably to be expected, so it comes as no surprise that some chapters make greater demands of readers’ prior knowledge than others. To put this another way, some chapters will be more accessible to a general readership. On the whole, there is a good balance between accessibility and scholarly incisiveness, which includes taking account of recent research and debates. Sometimes, however, the balance sways a little strongly in the direction of unresolved erudition, as is apparent in the decision to devote a chapter (24) to *Piers Plowman* rather than to Langland in the section titled “The Ricardian Poets.” This is justified by the opening paragraphs, which explain that there is considerable uncertainty about the identity of the poet, “whom we tend to call William Langland” (375). Elsewhere in the volume, however, and in the remainder of chapter 24, the name Langland is used without hesitation for the author of the poem.

Paradoxically, in chapter 25, the question of the possible identity of the *Gawain*-Poet is treated somewhat differently. In this case, Helen Cooper declares (408, fn. 11) that “hypotheses have not moved on much” since Malcolm Andrews’ survey of “Theories of Authorship” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet* (1997), and so the poet is best regarded as anonymous. In this case, the strong arguments of Andrew Breeze for the identification of Sir John Stanley as the *Gawain*-Poet could have been more fully acknowledged, even if they remain for many scholars unproven and possibly unprovable. See, most recently, Breeze (2023a) and (2023b).

These observations are not intended to detract, however, from the overall very positive impression created by this collection of accessible, helpful, and insightful essays, which will go a long way to fulfilling the editors’ wish that “this volume will encourage more readers to respond to the whole range of Middle English poetry in fresher and fuller ways” (11).

## References

- Breeze, Andrew. 2023a. *The Historical Arthur and the Gawain Poet. Studies on Arthurian and Other Traditions*. London: Lexington Books.
- Breeze, Andrew. 2023b. “Mary, Pearl, and Sir John Stanley (d.1414).” *Memoria y Civilización* 26 (2): 9–23.

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