

Sawyer, Daniel. 2024. *How to Read Middle English Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 240. ISBN 97801988952-37.

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Daniel Sawyer has written a comprehensive guide to the close reading and appreciation of Middle English verse. Drawing on a range of examples from the canonical to the little known, discussed in clear and personable prose, Sawyer expounds the craft of Middle English poetry at the level of individual poems (sometimes single lines and stanzas), while also offering larger insights into changing poetic practice. “Readers,” says Sawyer, “will finish this book equipped to enjoy poems from the period, able to find accessible copies of such poems without expense or hassle, and prepared to discuss those poems in detail should they want to, or be asked to, at school or university” (1). I heartily concur with the author’s assessment and will be recommending the book to students.

Sawyer’s contribution is timely and welcome. As pointed out in the Introduction, several introductory guides to close reading and poetic form have been published during the past ten years (including, most recently, Greenham 2019 and Hodgson 2021), but these tend to neglect Middle English. The period and its authors continue to be opened up by fine specialist studies (e.g. chapters in Cooper and Edwards 2023; Boffey and Edwards 2023); “[b]ut no past book explains the details of Middle English verse itself, its forms and systems, with a special focus on ways of reading and writing helpful to those meeting Middle English poetry for the first time” (2). A case might be made for J. A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre (2005), together with Turville-Petre (2007), as doing at least some of what Sawyer describes. What is so useful about *How to Read Middle English Poetry*, besides its specific focus on verse, is the thorough assimilation of recent scholarship—in particular, important studies of syntax and alliterative poetry—into an up-to-date guide for beginners, which is pragmatic in its objectives and approach. It serves a vital role in codifying current knowledge for new cohorts of students (as well as school and university instructors), rather than requiring them to supplement existing introductions with the array of subsequent correctives.

Sawyer begins this work in his Introduction. After setting out the book’s mission and context, he explains its bounds and his choices of examples. Sawyer follows the standard periodisation which puts the beginning of Middle English

poetry somewhere around 1100 or 1150 and its end around 1450 or 1500, with a further subdivision into early and late Middle English, before and after about 1350. He acknowledges, of course, the somewhat arbitrariness of these dates but advises, sanely, that “[p]rovided that readers bear in mind that these divisions slice through continuities, they can be useful” (4). It is pleasing to see a separate discussion of the extent of the overlap between Middle English and Older Scots: while noting points of difference between them (principally, their different date ranges), Sawyer’s decision to treat Middle English and Older Scots verse as “part of the same linguistic and craft tradition” (4) is surely the right one, given what is the still usual practice of teaching and studying them separately, to the neglect of much poetry written north of the Border. Sawyer is keen to redress such omissions: although Chaucer is the most cited poet, and verse in later Middle English predominates, he deliberately deploys less commonly taught examples: the thirteenth-century *Owl and the Nightingale* as an early example of four-beat lines (Chapter 4), the northern *Awntyrs off Arthure* for alliterative-stanzaic verse (Chapter 5), and the Harley lyrics for (among other things) tail-rhyme stanzas (Chapter 7), to name but a few. This has the advantage of contextualising Chaucer—“the one Middle English poet at all well known to general readers” (5)—within broader craft traditions (“he displayed wit and craft,” remarks Sawyer, “because he lived in crafty, witty times” 5) and avoids perpetuating certain inaccurate notions arising out of older Chaucer-centric scholarship (in particular, regarding the development [and supposed stagnation] of four- and five-beat lines: see Chapter 4). This approach underpins one of the book’s recurrent arguments for reading Middle English poetry today: its defamiliarising (and pleasurable) heterogeneity. There are lessons to be learned, says Sawyer, about what can seem like the “default, see-through medium” of modern standard English “from looking at the language when it was neither prestigious nor standardized” (5). This is impressed on readers throughout the book by means of examples showing the diversity but also the uncertainty of Middle English verse, fractured by regional variation and aware of its secondary status in comparison to Latin and French. Because “it was less standardized, less centralized, more in play, and hungry for influence for other traditions,” says Sawyer, English poetry in this period “fizzed with experimentation” (14). His book serves this up by the cupful.

After a brief first chapter discussing the reasons for reading early English poetry (its range—noted above—, its influence, and, despite assumptions to the contrary, its formal and thematic sophistication), at the heart of the book are seven chapters (2–8) dealing with “the craft and workings of Middle English verse and show[ing] how they might be discussed” (1). Sawyer begins at the small scale, with a chapter on word choices, before moving through phrasing, metre, rhyme, stanzas, and finally to poems’ over-arching forms. These chapters can be

read in sequence, but each can also stand on its own. Information on spelling, pronunciation, and grammar is collected in an Appendix, while an indexed Glossary provides a reference guide to the book's technical terms. Many arguments are, necessarily, at the granular level, as Sawyer "model[s] the process of reading closely, rather than every later stage of literary criticism" (5). At no point, however, can he be accused of "a dry naming of parts, murdering to dissect" (9), like that which is warned against in the Introduction. Even what at first look like quite formidable blocks of text (not helped by Oxford University Press's curiously narrow margins) are highly readable, often insightful, such as close readings of the unusual syntax of Thomas Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes*, stanza 1 (Chapter 2), or the effects of "cumulative subordination" at the end of the anonymous *Sir Orfeo* (44, developing Lester 1996, 125–126). There also appear more expansive discussions of what example quotations might do in their larger poetic contexts and linking together different facets of verse craft: after the discussion of *Sir Orfeo* just cited, for instance, "[r]eaders can . . . return to the Hoccleve stanza with which this chapter began, and examine not just its order but its subordination too" (45); and in the next chapter, a section on septenaries ends by connecting variations on the form to the development of common or ballad metre. The book is full of such constructive suggestions, showing how, although it might be difficult (and inadvisable) to develop a whole reading from a single formal feature, "[o]ften multiple features work together, or sit in tension, to achieve an effect" (77). This is training to be a critic, not just a reader, as Sawyer demonstrates by example how to marshal observations into cogent analytical arguments.

Three final chapters (9–11) tackle manuscripts and textual editing, multilingualism, and the orality and auralness of Middle English poetry. These discussions, while interesting, will be of less immediate relevance to those engaging with early English poetry for the first time. Sawyer must be commended, however, for recognising the intrinsic importance—true of all periods of literature, but especially before the advent of print—of the complexities of manuscript transmission, the multiple languages and dialects informing literary production, and the fact that poetry was spoken and heard, not just written and read, to the serious study of Middle English. This effort towards inclusion—of inducting readers into what might seem at first like a forbidding field of study, but which Sawyer shows can be undertaken (and enjoyed!) by anyone with patience and application—is evidenced throughout the book. For references to primary texts, Sawyer favours easily available editions, many of them freely online; glossing is generous and clear; and details of digital facsimiles of many of the manuscripts referenced are a useful addition to the bibliography. Dedicated discussions at the end of the Introduction of the use and limitations of dictionaries (the *Middle English Dictionary*, *Dictionary of the Older Scottish*

Tongue, and *Oxford English Dictionary*; see also Chapter 2), translations, and verse indexes (the *New Index of Middle English Verse* and *Digital Index of Middle English Verse*) are greatly worthwhile—Sawyer makes use of all of these. Characteristically, his approach is introductory but never condescending, not afraid to explain in full what to specialists is basic information, without ever appearing to talk down, and supplying further details and observations for more advanced or returning readers. Elsewhere, for instance, explanation of variations in Middle English spelling and the changes brought about by editing (in the Introduction and Chapter 9) might have seemed banal coming from a less able instructor; their sustained interest in the hands of Sawyer is testimony to his experience of elucidating such matters to students, while cautions against overinvestment in the orthographical choices of copyists remain valid to readers of all levels. I wonder, however, if it might have been better to retain period-specific letters—thorn (*þ*), eth (*ð*), yogh (*ȝ*), and ash (*æ*)—rather than transliterating these throughout, so as to avoid confusion when readers of the book encounter them in manuscript or early print for the first time. I appreciate, however, the desire to remove this difficulty from an introductory guidebook, and Sawyer justifies his decision in the List of Conventions.

It is perhaps slightly wishful thinking to believe that this book will appeal to a wider readership and not just school and university audiences. Despite the efforts to direct readers towards primary texts that are freely accessible online, the book itself represents a considerable expense (£70 hardback; the paperback and ebook are more affordable), and I expect that it will be purchased—whether as an ebook or a hard copy—mostly by study-orientated libraries. In order to achieve the greater reach envisaged by Sawyer, it would be helpful for some condensed version—perhaps the Appendix and Glossary—to be offered Open Access by Oxford University Press. Having said this, it is my hope that those who *do* get their hands on *How to Read Middle English Poetry* can realise the profit and delight of the period's verse—they have an excellent guide in Sawyer. Emerging, as noted in the Acknowledgements, out of “a national academic environment emphasizing research-driven publications,” it is refreshing to see a new medieval studies title which is dedicated to the first elements of the discipline. Sawyer's book has the potential to become a standard teaching text.

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