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In *Ideas of Authorship in the English and Scottish Dream Vision*, Laurie Atkinson provides a refreshing and cerebral take on the concept of late medieval and early modern “Authorship” in the poetry of four key English and Scottish writers, including John Skelton, Stephen Hawes, Gavin Douglas, and William Dunbar. These poets are traditionally viewed as “transitional figures” (21) between the late medieval and early modern periods, with “Dunbar and Hawes as the representatives of a superannuated medieval past, the difficult Skelton as an anomaly in English literary history, and Douglas as the harbinger of a new ‘Renaissance’ outlook” (21). The Makar poets, such as Dunbar and Douglas, for example, continue to receive only cursive attention in scholarly study, while their representative roles as transitioning between periods often overshadow the impact and values of their texts. As Atkinson puts it, however, the emergence of the author is “not a linear or monologic process” (4) or bound to a transitional understanding of history. Atkinson rigorously demonstrates that the concept of authorship among these poets transcends period labels and the convenience of clearcut labels and dichotomies. While he focuses more generally upon the textual productions of these authors, Atkinson casts particular light on their “stimulating but critically neglected dream visions and related first-person narratives” (2). In this book, Atkinson investigates the different variations and representations of authorship as envisioned by late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century English and Scottish poets as well as ideas of authorial self-promotion and self-representation. In doing so, this book aims to reassess prevailing theories and understandings about the “emergence of the English author” (2) and moreover identifies the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in England and Scotland as key sites of textual production which in turn are historically viewed as foundational for the “modern regime of authorship” (3). Atkinson’s connection between this emergence of the author to discussions and understandings of the “death of the author” (4) in the twentieth century (see, for example, Aryan 2020) gives additional attractiveness to the book’s value and interest to researchers, students, and enthusiasts beyond both medieval and early modern fields of study.

Chapter 1 analyses what Atkinson terms the “critical neglect of the key transitional period c. 1483–c. 1532” (6). It begins with identifying Geoffrey Chaucer’s contributions to the dream vision, and particularly his influence and impact via William Caxton and his printing press. The dream vision was an important framework within late medieval literature for articulating fictional scenarios and storyworlds. First-person narration enabled “a deliberate elaboration of the implicit contingency between their textual first person and the human author” (27). According to Atkinson, “the dream frame lent authority to narrative verse by claiming for it a significant other (and greater) than its literal meaning” (24). For Atkinson, Chaucer’s dream vision articulates “the revalorization of the agency of the vernacular writer described above” (23). Writing in his literary wake, Chaucer’s followers utilised his conception of the dream vision to insert versions of themselves into their first-person narratives and thereby providing “a unique opportunity for authorial self-promotion which continued to be developed by English and Scottish writers throughout the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth” (23). Atkinson identifies John Lydgate as a notable Chaucerian writer and case study whose techniques of “self-representation provide a formal and conceptual link between the Ricardian poetry of Chaucer and authorial self-promotion in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries” (31). There are some slight occasions in the book in which Atkinson’s writing can appear somewhat presumptuous. For example, he claims that “Bonaventure’s fourfold *modus faciendi librum* is so well known to the study of medieval authorship as to almost obviate quotation” (12). Perhaps it is for medievalist readers, but for non-medieval readers and other specialists, it is not necessarily so obvious and seems tonally unnecessary, although Atkinson proceeds to elaborate upon it on the following page (13) in any case. Overall, however, Atkinson’s writing is richly scholastic, enterprising, and thorough.

In Chapter 2, Atkinson shifts gears to concentrate on the first two transitional figures of his study: Skelton and Dunbar. As with Chapter 3, this chapter is a long one, but it brings its share of rewards. As Atkinson points out, their contributions have been studied individually in some detail, yet they are seldom studied together. In this chapter, he rightly demands a reappraisal of their dream visions as “experiments in authorship helps to overcome certain of the difficulties presented in their heterogeneous canons” (36). Atkinson firstly sets his sights on Skelton’s poem *The Bowges of Courte*, in which he argues that Skelton’s conscious decision to transform himself “into an object of scrutiny demonstrates his willingness to break down in order to rebuild the concept of authorship, in particular, *his* authorship” (35) and also examines Dunbar’s *Golden Targe*. Atkinson emphasises that Dunbar, however, “seems less concerned with his personal status as a Scottish author than in his place among a brotherhood of Scots *makaris*” (35). Skelton, on the other hand, unveils an approach to authorial

self-promotion that “derives much of its impetus from Skelton’s reconfigurations of inherited poetic forms and professed affiliation to royal and aristocratic forms” (39). Atkinson also investigates Skelton’s *Garlande of Laurell*, which he aptly interprets as “an instance of the self-representational potential of the dream vision taken to its self-regarding extreme” (85). Atkinson’s readings are thoughtful, enterprising, confident, and persuasive. This chapter is especially useful for scholars considering newfound approaches towards the transitions between fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English and Scottish poets. It also shows how the works of these two poets inform and contrast each other as well as their shifting ideas about and negotiations of authorship and self-promotion.

Chapter 2’s final remarks and reflections set the stage for Chapter 3, which investigates Stephen Hawes’s dream poetry. Atkinson admits that Hawes as a poet “cannot boast the poetic ingenuity of Skelton, the virtuosity of Dunbar, nor, as will be seen, the humanist ambitions of Douglas” (88), which is accurate, but it is also perhaps unfair to compare Hawes to these other poets and to view him on his own terms. In this chapter, Atkinson focuses on what he terms Hawes’s use of “obscure allegory,” that is, “a *circulus in probando* whereby the significance of the poet’s writings is evidenced by their impenetrability to all but the initiated” (88). While this sounds potentially alchemical, there are indeed parallels between Hawes’s poetry and the alchemical poetry produced during this time. In both works, to some extent, “poetry, allegory, and rhetoric are made almost indistinguishable, and the role of the poet becomes less to enlighten or even to entertain his readers than to persuade them of the profitability” (88). Atkinson particularly draws attention to Hawes’s *Pastime of Pleasure*, the *Conforte of Lovers*, and takes a quick look at the *Example of Vertu*, yet this cursory discussion does not take away from the impact of his argument here. Atkinson proposes that Hawes’s poetry has the effect of “allegory turning in on itself, frequently disorientating, ultimately frustrating, but which seems to have represented a ‘pastime of pleasure’ for readers with pretensions to the requisite *experience*” (88), and which appears to be consistent through his rigorous analysis. Chapter 3 also pays its dues to the poetry of Lydgate, another often neglected fifteenth-century poet whose prolix creative output is historically overlooked but has since had a surge of renewed interest in recent decades. Lydgate’s poetry was highly influential for Hawes, which in turn gave shape to and informed Hawes’s own ideas of authorship. Atkinson argues in this section that Hawes and Lydgate diverge “in their interpretation of the relationship between rhetoric, allegory, and poetry” (98). According to Atkinson, “Where Lydgate asserts the power of poetry to illuminate historical and moral truths, Hawes turns the conceit on its head, suggesting instead that the hallmark of good poetry is the *veiling* of truths that are too sensitive or *recherche* for open publication” (93).

The final chapter (Chapter 4) returns to Makar poetry as Atkinson takes on the topic of implied authorship in Gavin Douglas's poetry. Chapter 4 is also a lengthy chapter, and while the length can be justified by Atkinson's rich attention to detail and thorough investigation, one wonders if the chapters in general could be shorter to give more space for readers to breathe and process everything. In addition, shorter chapters might provide more accessibility and readability to readers who are previously unfamiliar with these English and Scottish poets. Chapter 4 initially examines Douglas's *Palice of Honour* in an analysis that is comparatively brief given the length of the chapter. For Atkinson, Douglas's *Palice* "presents the *possibility* rather than the celebration of an authorial canon and a testing ground for Douglas's self-promotional strategy in the *Eneados*" (132). Atkinson continues with a discussion of the *Eneados*, which is in fact not a dream vision, but rather a translation of Virgil's *The Aeneid* in the context of Maffeo Vegio's *Supplementum*. As Atkinson observes, Douglas's poetry makes a self-reflective return towards the "representation displayed in Chaucer's dream visions, but by way of a poetic tradition that has given to the vernacular poet the status of a literary author" (132). Atkinson argues here that Douglas employs a self-promotional strategy in the *Eneados*, one that suggests "*implied* authorship as an alternative to self-representation-as-author" (132). According to Atkinson, Douglas's *Eneados* "encourages the imagining by readers of an authorial agent who is responsible for the compilation of its multiple parts into a continuous, authorially controlled text" (180).

In his conclusion, Atkinson acknowledges the challenges of untangling concepts and notions of authorship during this period and reiterates that the English and Scottish poets discussed are characterised by unique and "four distinct engagements with tradition and opportunity, united by their utilization of a particular form" (181). While Atkinson certainly makes the case for focusing upon these four poets, it would also be intriguing to consider how other Makar poets, such as Robert Henryson and Alexander Barclay, play into the proposed distinctions of authorship during this period, and whether they provide counterexamples or subvert our understandings of Atkinson's exploration of authorship and self-promotion. In Atkinson's view, Skelton and Douglas are characterised by their more "author-centred claims for the authority of their writings" (181) and benefitted from their clerical salaries and the privilege of having access to classical and humanist poetry. Dunbar and Hawes, however, did not share this luxury, yet they curiously appear next to Chaucer and Lydgate during the early sixteenth century (181). Atkinson further recognises that the influence of the dream vision continues beyond the scope of his study: "the utility of the dream vision for interrogating the theories and practices of textual production and literary authority was not forgotten during the later sixteenth century, nor has it ever been" (184).

Beyond the strengths of the argument and its analysis, *Ideas of Authorship in the English and Scottish Dream Vision* also boasts an aesthetically pleasing cover and a highly affordable e-book price, which should make it more attractive to students interested in learning more about these Makar and English poets. Atkinson's book is unique in its scope and breaks new ground, shining new light on these underappreciated poets, the value of their works, and their contributions to our modern conception of the author and ideas of authorship. His study is particularly beneficial in taking a hammer to the traditionally rigid demarcations between late medieval and early Renaissance literary and historical scholarship, identifying it as a continuum marked by distinctive shifts and changes in authorship. Atkinson's enthusiasm and recognition for these poets is also highly motivational, encouraging readers to revisit these poets who are much more than simply transitional figures in the literary canon.

References

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