

Worcester, William. 2023. *The Boke of Noblesse and the English Texts from its Codicil*. Edited by Catherine Nall and Daniel Wakelin. Early English Text Society O.S. 362. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 350. ISBN 9780198894513.

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In this volume, Catherine Nall and Daniel Wakelin offer a new critical edition of William Worcester's *Boke of Noblesse*, a work that has attracted increasing scholarly attention over the past few decades. Previously edited only by John Gough Nichols (1860), who failed to recognize Worcester's authorship despite associating the treatise with Sir John Fastolf's milieu, the text is here presented for the first time alongside the English section of the Codicil intended to supplement the contents of the main work. The edition is preceded by a detailed Introduction (xiii–cviii) and is accompanied by Explanatory Notes (124–255), a Glossary (256–76), and an Index of Proper Names (277–88). In addition, three previously unprinted Latin and macaronic texts from the Codicil omitted from Joseph Stevenson's 1864 edition, are included in an Appendix (107–23) and introduced by brief prefatory notes.

Written in the aftermath of the Hundred Years' War, *The Boke of Noblesse* is a political treatise of considerable importance, as it offers valuable insights into contemporary conceptions of kingship, national identity, and warfare. Probably compiled from 1451, it is “centrally concerned with the loss of the Lancastrian lands in France, from the eventual delivery of Maine to the French in 1448, to the fall of Bordeaux, in the *Boke's* account, in June 1451” (liv) and urges action to reverse these losses. The text is addressed to “the most hygh and myghty prince Kyng Edward the iiijth” (3), although there is no evidence that the king ever read it. Its author, William Worcester (1415–c. 1480/85), served Sir John Fastolf—a distinguished soldier during the Hundred Years' War and executor of John of Lancaster, Duke of Bedford—from 1438 until Fastolf's death in 1459. Educated at Oxford, Worcester acted as Fastolf's administrator, legal researcher, and secretary. He was also an exceptionally active reader whose interests ranged from medicine and astrology to history and antiquarian scholarship. As Nall and Wakelin demonstrate, one of the most fascinating aspects of the *Boke* lies in the possibility of reconstructing the processes underlying its composition through Worcester's reading practices. Traces of these can be found in a number of manuscripts owned and annotated by him, as well as in other works attributed to

his authorship, such as a translation of Cicero's *De senectute* (xiii). Together, these materials reveal the intellectual foundations upon which *The Boke of Noblesse* was built.

The Introduction to the present edition addresses the origin and textual history of both the treatise and its Codicil, from a meticulous codicological and palaeographical description of the manuscripts to a detailed reconstruction of the historical circumstances surrounding their composition. Both texts survive in unique witnesses—London, British Library, MS Royal 18.B.xxii and London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 506 respectively—which represent fair copies produced by different scribes but revised by Worcester himself. Particularly relevant in this respect is the colophon in Worcester's hand on f. 42r of the Royal manuscript, which dates the completion of his revision to 15 June 1475. A substantial section of the Introduction is devoted to analysing Worcester's own interventions in both the *Boke* and the Codicil. These include erasures, interlinear and marginal additions, corrections, explanatory comments and supplementary information derived from first-hand accounts as well as from his extensive reading. In the case of the *Boke*, the editors also identify two distinct phases of marginal annotation executed in different inks.

Nall and Wakelin also discuss the sources used by Worcester, which range from classical authors such as Cicero and Cassiodorus to medieval writers including Geoffrey of Monmouth, Ralph de Diceto, Ranulph Higden, Christine de Pizan, and Alain Chartier, reflecting reading habits of fifteenth-century England. The editors also devote attention to Worcester's style—inspired by the “administrative ‘curial’ prose and to a lesser extent Latin periodic style” (lxxix)—and language, of which the editors describe morphological, syntactical, orthographical, and lexical peculiarities, well representative of late Middle English.

The edited text presented in the second part of the volume is complete and reliable and adheres consistently to the editorial principles outlined in the Introduction. Textual footnotes record annotations made by later readers of the Royal manuscript, while the extensive Explanatory Notes elucidate the contents of both the *Boke* and the Codicil, trace their connections with Worcester's reading, and provide some details of the editorial history of the treatise.

Nall and Wakelin's edition is distinguished by its meticulous attention to detail and undoubtedly represents an essential resource for historians, literary scholars, philologists, and linguists alike. Historians will find in it invaluable access to the perspective of a man who, as an administrator in the service of a veteran of the Hundred Years' War, was closely connected to the political and military events of his age. Philologists and literary scholars, meanwhile, are now provided with a comprehensive edition that situates the *Boke* within the historical, social, and

cultural context that informed its composition, which is quite rare with fifteenth-century texts.

References

- Stevenson, Joseph, ed. 1861–64. *Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France during the Reign of Henry VI, King of England*. 2 vols. Rolls Series 22. London: Longman.
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