Review Article:

Revisiting the Middle Ages:
*The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*

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This huge, and hugely impressive, volume cannot be done justice to in a single review, even a review as long as the editor has allowed this one to be. It is a beautifully written text, and it wears its own great learning very lightly: I especially enjoyed the pun on 'polyvocality/parrot talk' in the analysis of Skelton's *Speke Parrot* by Burrow (p. 801), a rare instance of modern theory's fatal fascination with the pun actually working to the advantage of the material under discussion.

The book also comes with a very judicious frame, in the form of prefaces to individual sections and to the work as a whole; the latter, in particular, might almost stand as an epitome of developments in medieval literary study since the time, early in this century, of the first *Cambridge History of English Literature*, and is an impressive contribution in its own right to the study of approaches to medieval studies in the twentieth century.

The volume, as a whole, systematically studies a huge range of texts in the
three main languages in use in England throughout the period, as well as in other European vernaculars. Much of this material is likely to be new to readers; thus Field’s careful account of ‘Romance in England, 1066-1400’ includes detailed summaries of ‘the surviving examples of Anglo-Norman romance’ (p. 155), since such material, important for the total understanding of romance in French, Latin and English, is relatively inaccessible and unknown. Not only that: by allowing the same text to be discussed in different contexts — the Luve Ron of Thomas of Hales, for instance, in ‘Early Middle English literature’ (Hahn) and ‘The friars and medieval English literature’ (Fleming); the Ormulum in ‘Monastic productions’ (Cannon) and ‘Englishing the Bible, 1066-1549’ (Lawton); Robin Hood poems in ‘Medieval literature and law’ (Green), ‘Vox populi and the literature of 1381’ (Aers), and ‘Romance after 1400’ (Cooper) — the volume dramatically widens its focus for the reader. Hahn, for instance, considers the internal and external gender relations of the Luve Ron, and the significance of its use of the vernacular, while Fleming addresses the literary traditions of the Franciscan order which inspired it.

More importantly, the volume argues its several corners with great conviction and energy. It has a number of major quarries in its sights. One is a suspicion of overarching narratives which pay insufficient attention to the cross-currents and tangled threads within their grand récit (cf. p. xvii), like that which Shakespeare’s Lear creates when he ‘nostalgizes his origins in a corporate medieval past’ (p. 774). This feature is dramatised by the very title of Crane’s chapter, ‘Anglo-Norman Cultures in England’, a chapter which well instantiates the implied claim of that plural noun; the singular and abstract ‘Latinitas’ of Baswell’s chapter title might appear to promise something diametrically opposed, but his essay shares Crane’s understanding: ‘we should speak ... of a gamut of Latinities in medieval England’ (p. 144). In much the same way, the apparent singleness of Hanna’s topic, ‘Alliterative poetry’, which ‘by long-standing tradition ... should be entitled “The alliterative revival”’ is deconstructed in an early footnote by reference to the Alliterative Revivals (p. 488 and n. 3). Again, in ‘Lollardy’ Justice aims to show how ‘various in doctrine, style and self-understanding [Lollardy was] through its 150 years of history and in its various clienteles’ (p. 662). And in ‘Monastic productions’ (Cannon), the plural noun of the title refers not simply to the varieties of literary texts which the monasteries produced or preserved, but also to at least two distinct literary understandings: an ‘archival’ sensibility, and one which came to the fore in the fourteenth century and after, and finds clearest expression in the writing of monks with literary aspirations like Lydgate.

Another interest of the volume is an awareness of the many uses to which foundation myths, or legends of origin, can be put. This is clearly evidenced in chronicle material, the subject of ‘Writing history in England’ (Galloway), and of the romances analysed by Field and Cooper. For all that they do not feature
prominently in the index, foundation myths, a cardinal element of medieval writing, are very important in the volume. Brutus, Arthur, Alfred, Edward the Confessor, the protagonists of the Troy story: the list of heroic antecedents to whom a medieval writer could appeal is almost endless. Opposing sides in any dispute — Anglo-Saxons and Normans; insular English and mainland French (p. 595 n. 24); Scots and English (p. 714) — regularly laid claim to the same myths, but slanted in such a way as to do down their rivals. The Anglo-Normans identified Saxon speech with the barking of dogs, but were themselves so spoken of by speakers of Parisian French (p. 47); the role of ‘uncouth Other’ could be filled now by Jews, now by women (pp. 108-9); the term ‘common’ was claimed by both Parliament and the rebels in 1381 (p. 445).

For that matter, texts have their own foundation myths, which they express in terms of paternity and filial dependence (eg. p. 733), though, as Copeland’s previous study of medieval translation has shown, the son is regularly plotting to do away with his father and claim the kingdom for himself. Thus Lancastrian propaganda created a father of English poetry in Geoffrey Chaucer, whom Caxton would present as ‘the originary figure in a history of English writing’ (p. 725), whom Reformers would later claim for themselves (pp. 845-8), and whom Sidney would reckon one of the makers ‘of the characteristic Protestant English imperial rhyme’ (p. 850).

Throughout the period covered by this volume, royalty was made regularly aware of, and used literary and other means to conceal, its own uncertain status, especially when, as in the cases of William the Conqueror, Henry IV, and Henry VII, the crown had been seized unlawfully. Monarchs and their loyal retainers therefore invoke the examples of the past strategically and selectively. William the Conqueror invokes the memory of Edward the Confessor in his coronation ceremonies (p. 128); William and Henry V both use the translation of the bodily remains of their predecessors Edward and Richard II respectively as a sort of theatrical confirmation of their own reigns (pp. 129, 646); Henry VII uses romance ‘as a legitimizing element in his own propaganda’ (pp. 706-7, 737). Similarly, acting as unofficial Laureate for the new Lancastrian dynasty, Hoccleve overlooks the ambiguities of Henry IV’s usurpation by focusing on the new dynasty’s illustrious, and totally legitimate, forebears (pp. 644, 646); this material, from Strohm’s chapter ‘Hoccleve, Lydgate and the Lancastrian court’, occurs in a subsection tellingly entitled ‘Hoccleve and the poetics of legitimation’. The literature produced in such a context can be usefully contrasted with that produced for a legitimate king like Richard II (p. 659); in much the same way, during the reigns of Henry VII and VIII, ‘courtly indirection’ and ‘instinctive self-censorship’ (p. 812), may be necessary strategies for the court poet’s own survival (so Burrow). The usurper often found himself in a similar double-bind. Henry IV’s promulgation of
the statute *De Heretoico Comburendo* owed as much to his need to keep Archbishop Arundel on line as to his own religious beliefs; left to himself, Justice speculates, Henry might have supported anti-clerical reform measures (p. 674).

Such enterprises regularly try to ‘suppress or to overcome the revolutionary or the subversive’ (p. 694): as it were, to stop the clock of history and the messy drama of the here and now — to suppress as much as possible of the text’s own ‘specific historical conditions — including the conditions of textual production and reception’ (p. 284). Lindenbaum (‘London texts and literate practice’) is here writing about Chaucer’s work, and she shares her understanding of it with several other contributors to the volume; but the volume bears repeated witness to the ways in which literature’s recourse to a never-never land of mythic origins and romance is always undermined by the particular circumstances in which it is produced, which persist in leaving tell-tale traces everywhere. Late fifteenth century interest in the figure of Richard the Lionheart, for instance, witnesses to specific anxieties, in the aftermath of the fall of Constantinople in 1453, about the ‘relentless advance of the Turks’ (p. 698).

Such appropriations of the past, of course, are not peculiar to the Middle Ages, and the volume documents a number of foundation myths, all ideologically driven, by which subsequent centuries approached the Middle Ages. Most notably, in the sixteenth century, the drive of the nascent Anglican tradition to find in its own Anglo-Saxon roots an English Christianity, uncontaminated by medieval Romish influences, by means of which it could authorise its own reforming practices (eg pp. 461-2, 788, 849) bred a split between Middle Ages and Renaissance/Reformation (pp. 282-3, 821) that still colours thinking on the subject.

The volume’s determination to unsay this particular myth leads to impressive concluding chapters on the reigns of Henry VII and VIII — ‘The allegorical theatre’ (Watkins), ‘The experience of exclusion’ (Burrows) and ‘Reformed literature and literature reformed’ (Cummings) — and triumphantly justifies its decision to cross the watershed of the Reformation. (Other writers, like Dolan, Kirby-Fulton, Cooper, and Clopper, end with brief reference to sixteenth-century developments; Lawton’s ‘Englishing the Bible, 1066-1549’ impressively reads backwards to Ælfric and forwards to More and Tyndale.) In these chapters we see chickens coming home to roost which were first fledged at the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth centuries. A simple example of the process might be the translation that William l’Isle made in 1623 of Ælfric’s treatise on the Bible (p. 462). More significant would be the extension of a royal power under the Tudors (p. 775), generated not by legitimate succession but by conquest (p. 736), and supported by the creation of organs of state censorship, developments with immediate parallels and antecedents in the reigns of Henry IV and his son. We could also note the way in which writers like More used the
understandings of the Wycliffites to precisely opposite effect, and attempted to transform the Wycliffite commitment to vernacularity into an element of state control of vernacularity (pp. 832, 843).

The drive to rehabilitate the vernacular and so to make available, initially through translated texts, knowledge previously available only in Latin, or, in the high Middle Ages, Anglo-Norman, thus runs like a thread through the volume, with orthodox writers like Manning of Brunne and John Trevisa, and heterodox writers like the Wycliffe translators of the Bible, all in the fourteenth century, making common cause with the Protestant John Rastell in the sixteenth (p. 780). By this light, as others have noted, the sixteenth century is the heir of developments in the previous two hundred years (cf. pp. 639, 689, 787): Anne Hudson has labelled those earlier developments a premature Reformation, and maybe we could see them as a premature Renaissance too, though the word 'premature' itself carries an ideological charge which we need to be wary of igniting.

Other myths are also ripe for deconstruction: notably, what Field calls 'modern perceptions of order and evolutionary development' (p. 167), the standard assumptions of literary history in this century. Aers, for instance, offers (for him) an unusually measured critique of 'modern liberal or deconstructionist traditions of criticism' (pp. 449, 451). These assumptions are not regularly referred to in the volume — in Olson's and Hanna's papers, for instance, they are relegated to footnotes or dismissed in an introductory paragraph — but they certainly fuel its revisionist agenda, and the new interpretation of one topic, 'The Middle English mystics' (Watson) receives by way of introduction an elegant summary of late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century approaches to the subject, which explains how the limited focus on a few authors which resulted, and their characterisation as 'pragmatic and particularist' (p. 547), risk severe distortion of the evidence. The line between mystic and other religious writing, Watson argues, is far from absolute: 'Rolle, the Cloud-author and the rest are all involved in the same socio-political discussion as Chaucer, Langland and the Lollards' (p. 544).

The volume's attentiveness to the previously-noted foundation myths favoured by medieval writers reflects its awareness that, no matter how much literature tries to cut itself free from its material (as opposed to its mythic) origins and circumstances, it is always, inescapably, compromised by its implication in their processes. This awareness finds readiest expression in a Section, 'Institutional Productions', which considers Cannon's previously-noted piece and two complementary chapters, that of Fleming and 'Classroom and confession' (Woods and Copeland). Differences of emphasis between monastic and mendicant orders are appropriately noted — the former's investment, for instance, in the chronicle tradition; the latter's enthusiastic cultivation of sermon literature (pp. 359-62) and
central role in the development of scholasticism. At the same time, these
differences conceal a rich cross-fertilisation of material: for example, 'an
essentially mendicant literary agenda defined the work of many late medieval
religious who were not friars' (p. 368). In this connection, Kirby-Fulton's chapter,
'Piers Plowman,' is well worth noting; describing Langland as an 'interested
participant and observer in several communities or circles, both reading and “non-
reading”', she refers Langland's work tellingly to its origins in monastic and
Mendicant habits of thought (pp. 529-36).

Inevitably, those who claim to speak for the, or any, centre will overlook
minority interests: especially in times of crisis, medieval writers are trying to
produce their own grand récit in which everyone knows and sticks to his - and, of
course, her - place. But this volume prefers to look over than to overlook.
Nowadays we are less likely to overlook women as producers and consumers of
literature, and as the distorted and distorting mirror of male fears and fantasies. The
return of this particular Repressed is extremely fully documented in almost every
article in the volume. In the Index the entry on women runs to almost a whole
column, much more, say, than 'monasteries', even though, as Cannon remarks,
' monasteries figure very large indeed in a history of writing in Britain' (p. 319).
Lindenbaum offers a most telling instance of the ways in which male writers
represented women, when she notes the similarities between ordinances for
gentlewomen in courtesy literature of the later fifteenth century and
those for
London's prostitutes (p. 306).

Other voices silenced by authority, their spoken words preserved for the most
part only in the written caricature authority made of them - think, for example, of
Gower's presentation of the 'vox populi' of the 1381 uprising as 'bestial noise' in
his Vox Clamantis (pp. 441, 595) — include artisans and religious dissidents.
These figures are obviously foregrounded in Aers's article, but they also figure
prominently in the chapters by Lindenbaum, Green and Justice. The creation of an
orthodox self in opposition to the heretical other may operate even on stylistic
levels: Lindenbaum argues suggestively that Lydgate's Latinate diction may be a
marker of the difference he is trying to create between himself and the Wycliffites
in respect of his, and their, use of the vernacular (p. 298).

Several of these Others are deemed important enough to have individual
chapters devoted to them. The volume is, from the outset (p. xv), up-front about the
ambiguities of a work whose title promises studies in English literature, and then
includes the earlier-noted chapters on Latinity and Anglo-Norman, as well as
chapters on the Welsh, the Irish and the Scots, by, respectively, Roberts, Dolan and
Goldstein. With the former material I have no difficulties. Baswell and Crane's
work well complements other material in the early Sections of the volume: 'Old
English and its afterlife' (Lerer), 'National, world and women's history: writers

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and readers in post-Conquest England’ (Johnson and Wogan-Browne), and the earlier-noted pieces of Hahn, Field, Galloway and Cannon. The trilingual literary culture that obtained from the time of the Norman Conquest at least till the end of the fifteenth century, and to which these chapters bear excellent witness, is one of the major stories still in urgent need of being written (cf. p. xvi), and the volume as a whole has an energetic stab at writing it; notably, by insisting on its complexities, and on the need not to oversimplify it as a sort of medieval return of the Repressed, when English regains in the later Middle Ages the position taken from it at the time of the Conquest. The essays of Field, Johnson and Wogan-Browne, Galloway and Cannon beautifully represent the relations between the three main literary cultures by considering texts which moved easily and regularly between Latin and one or the other vernacular, or both. Cannon’s account of the ways in which monastic literary production ‘assimilat[ed]... vernacular writing to one, great, polyglot, tradition’ (p. 327) could almost be taken as an epitome of the question; Field’s analysis of Middle English versions of Anglo-Norman texts leads to the conclusion that their development ‘is far more complex than the mere popularization’ of the latter by the former (p. 167).

Of course, as Cannon reminds us, we must not lose sight of the ‘important vertical relationships between sporadic early productions in the British vernaculars ... and the more copious traditions of Latin and French’ (p. 327), in which latter languages, Green notes (p. 408), legal texts were almost invariably written. But relations between the three languages were never simply hierarchical, and as relevant a model is that argued for by Watkins, in his analysis of the morality play Mankind, when he speaks of a ‘collision between Latin and vernacular cultures’ (p. 771). Of course, many medieval writers accept, even as they invert, one of the cardinal myths of the Middle Ages, the foundational status of the Latin language as point both of departure and of final appeal for literary production. So, for instance, Geoffrey of Monmouth creates a fictional British origin for his own Historia Regum Britanniae, itself a reflex of the supposed descent of the earliest settlers of England from Brutus, so as to ‘invert ... the general hierarchy of Latin and vernaculars in Geoffrey’s time’. This comment is Baswell’s (p. 132), though the up-ending of conventional relations to which it refers is more apparent than real in Geoffrey’s case: the fictional Welsh source clearly cannot enjoy the wide circulation which Geoffrey’s Latin ‘translation’ will grant it.

But other translators, with a clearer sense of linguistic relativity, mount a more significant challenge to the supremacy of Latin: think of King Alfred’s preface to his translation of the Pastoral Care; Chaucer’s prologue to his Treatise on the Astrolabe; chapter 15 of the Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible translation. In all of these cases, Latin is described as merely the penultimate link, after Hebrew, Arabic and Greek, in a chain of linguistic signification. Chaucer and the Wycliffite Bible
receive attention in their own right in this volume; King Alfred, seen throughout the Middle Ages as a founding father of vernacular translation, is also well represented. By this light, the Reformer William Tyndale was merely following in the footsteps of his medieval predecessors when he enthusiastically favoured the Hebrew of the Old Testament over the Vulgate Latin (p. 473).

As a tangible instance of the links between literary cultures to which this first Section addresses itself so well, we might note, after the Conquest, the different uses made by English and Norman writers of their Anglo-Saxon past. The monk who produced the annal for 1087 in the Peterborough Chronicle implicitly invokes the English King, Alfred, who struggled to develop a vernacular culture in danger of collapse in the face of foreign invasion (pp. 14, 19, 24-5); the author of The Owl and the Nightingale cites Alfred as the author of a set of proverbs, even as he draws on the Fables of the Anglo-Norman Marie de France (p. 33), who herself claimed to have translated the latter by way of an intermediate translation by King Alfred (p. 46). Like the Peterborough Chronicle, and at about much the same time as the final continuator was working on it, Norman writers like Henry of Huntingdon (p. 263) and Geoffrey Gaimar (p. 40) could also appeal to the precedent of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle — a work which, indeed, the latter translated into Anglo-Norman (p. 261): not, though, as the Peterborough annalist did, to lament the breach between Norman present and English past, but rather (so Gaimar) to argue for a continuity between pre- and post-Conquest times, and, by giving the conquerors proper English roots, to justify their conquest; or (so Henry) to argue for the Conquest as a punishment which the English had brought upon themselves by their own wickedness. Anglo-Saxon texts were preserved throughout the period in Benedictine libraries (pp. 324-5), and in the late eleventh century the Chronicle was translated into Latin (p. 329). Royal charters of the mid-twelfth century, copied by a French scribe, and mangled when recycled in the fourteenth by an English scribe, can readily map the decline of Anglo-Saxon (p. 69 n. 19, cf. p. 72 n. 26), and give point, in the fifteenth century, to comments by Ullerston, in his contribution to the Oxford University debate about biblical translation (1401), and Caxton, in the prologue to his translation of the Enyedos (1491), on the foreign language Old English had become. (Ullerston’s important contribution is not included in the relevant essays of the volume; Caxton’s prologue is discussed in Lerer’s thoughtful chapter on Caxton, but not this particular detail.) By the time we reach the sixteenth century, as earlier noted, Old Saxon has become a stick for reforming prelates to beat the Romish dogs with.

Section II of the volume considers medieval England’s links with its own insular Others, Scottish, Irish and Welsh — though not Cornish, an omission the volume itself acknowledges — all of whom, until recently, formed part of a United Kingdom and a Britain never so Great as when Churchill and Mrs. Thatcher
invoked it to trounce Johnny Foreigner. I confess to some unease about the inclusion of this material. Well aware that Britain as a modern idea hardly predates the sixteenth century (cf. pp. 817, 822; on its earlier use to describe the people displaced by the invading English, see p. 105), the General Preface tackles the problem head-on by urging that 'the looser imagining of “Britain” typical of the Middle Ages seems ... more apt for the future than that developed over the last 300 years' (p. xv). But if we are going to be thoroughly modern, post-Brussels, post-Maastricht, and if the intersection of England with its own island fringes justifies a Section on them, why not one on the intersection of medieval England with mainland Europe? Europe — notably France, but also Italy — has always been as much England’s Other as the Welsh, Irish and Scots: witness the ways in which medieval English writers regularly define themselves against not only insular west and north (pp. 43, 69 n. 18, 77, 111) but also the countries of mainland Europe (pp. 111, 127 n. 12). Yet the latter narrative is too huge to be included here other than in passing.

I find the material in this second Section useful in the general sense that literary traditions as distinctively different as those in Wales and Ireland were can offer a useful perspective on English literary traditions. It has more particular interest for the reader, too. Dolan’s chapter on Ireland not only refers to the native Irish traditions, and overarching and ubiquitous Latin culture, but also includes material produced in English and Anglo-Norman by the invaders, and so holds up a fascinating refracting mirror to the trilingual situation in England. Goldstein’s chapter on Scotland considers English material both directly, when the so-called Scottish Chaucerians write in the knowledge of English literary traditions up to and including Caxton, and indirectly, when other Scottish writers redefine foundation myths used by the English so as to claim a pre-existent origin for themselves. All the same, the material in this section inevitably has more the feel of a general introduction to its subject than is true of the other contributions to the volume. Some of it could have been housed elsewhere in the volume, as, for example, when Hanna’s essay on alliterative poetry includes comment (p. 497) on the development of alliterative poetry in fifteenth-century Scotland, and Cannon, whose essay on monastic production expresses a preference for ‘the monastic history of England over that of Wales and Scotland ... and ... ignore[s] ... Ireland altogether’ since ‘monasticism in all parts of the British Isles was drawn into the English orbit ... through conquest or ... cultural imperialism’ (pp. 321-22), nevertheless includes reference to Scotland and Wales (pp. 324-25).

The volume is also up-front about its inevitable exclusions: if the literary moment is always specific to time and place, there is, in principle, no end to the number of such moments that need to be written about. Most essays in the volume make thorough attempts to contextualise their subjects of study, but Lindenbaum’s
essay on literary culture in London has to do service, says Wallace, for 'accounts of other places that have yet to be written, cannot yet be written, or have found no space for inclusion here: Cornwall, East Anglia, York and Yorkshire', and for 'forgotten texts; for example, the writings and public inscriptions of Jews' (p. xvi). In this context he might, I suppose, have noted 'Middle English Lives' (Boffey), which gives itself a wide cast, at material much of which figures nowhere else in the volume, including medieval epitaphs, letters and pilgrimage narratives, literary narratives of the de Casibus type, saints' lives and romances, and, lastly, Margery Kempe. So much, and such diverse, material clearly witnesses to the volume's determination to challenge accepted boundaries in the name of more generous medieval understandings. We must be grateful to Boffey for including material on Chaucer's tales of the Prioress and Second Nun and Lydgate's *Life of Our Lady*, since Olson's chapter on Chaucer offers only a single brief comment on the *Second Nun's Tale* (p. 585), and nothing at all about the *Prioress's Tale*; Strohm similarly has almost nothing to say about Lydgate's *Life*. Yet the challenge of contextualising all this diverse information, or of referring it to its final idiosyncratic flowering in the chapter, in Margery Kempe, does not yield as much as one might have hoped for, and can stand as a figure for the challenge confronting the whole volume.

Another difficulty concerns the volume's determination to 'say it new': which, as I hope I have implied, it mostly does with great success. The double-bind which follows from this strategy comes strikingly to the fore in Olson's chapter on Chaucer. Olson's approach is in keeping with the volume's determination to 'ease the bottleneck that has formed, in literary criticism and curricular design, around late fourteenth-century England' (p. xii). Well aware of the ways in which Chaucer's current given status is in large measure the reflex of Lancastrian and later interests, Olson looks to contextualise his subject by using the description of him by his contemporary Deschamps. He therefore divides his material broadly into two sections: Chaucer the court poet, and Chaucer the translator. In this latter, his interests so exactly overlap with mine that I was glad to be able to refer to the work in my own current work-in-progress: I note particularly Olson's comment that 'thinking of Chaucer's achievement as a range of different kinds of translation is perhaps as valid as any single approach to the entirety of his work' (p. 576). As Hanna argues (pp. 499-500), translation was as vital an element in the literary production of the period as it was in Chaucer's own work. The challenge with this approach as applied to Chaucer, though, as Olson acknowledges (p. 566), is that it takes for granted much that beginning students need to have laid out for them, in however abbreviated a form, before attempting Chaucer, and treats some works cursorily or not at all. These omissions are sometimes made good elsewhere in the volume. Even so, gaps remain. The tales of the Shipman and Canon's Yeoman are
not mentioned at all; that of the Merchant only once, in company with other Chaucerian tales whose marginal annotations, in Latin, argue for the ongoing importance of Latinity in late-fourteenth-century literary culture (p. 151). General comment on The Canterbury Tales includes one reference to its ‘dialogic’ structure, and another to its ‘generic diversity and polyvocality’ (p. 284), but a student would have to be extremely agile to get much sense of the whole work from these fragmentary observations.

In so addressing the academy rather than the students who must be the work’s raison d’être — even if they are unlikely ever to be able to afford the book — Olson makes common cause with other contributors to the volume: with Clopper, for instance, who names the York Realist and the N-Town Plays (p. 748), though he does not explain the former term, and forces the reader to wait for several pages for an explanation of the latter, and who further speaks of the ‘chilling effect’ of the actions of Edward VI on developments in biblical drama (p. 765) without explaining what they were; or with Hahn, who fails to gloss the term ‘forbisnes’ of Ancrene Wisse (p. 81).

One of the strengths of the volume lies in its determination to work to as wide a definition as possible of the term ‘literature’, or, in Baswell’s formulation (p. 128), ‘textual documentation’. Baswell works with a generous understanding, shared by other contributors to the volume, of the interplay between writing and other sign systems which interconnect in “the communal memory” (p. 128, cf. p. 455) and ‘cultural imagination of the period’ (p. 134). Consequently, we have a number of chapters devoted to material of a very practical cast: the texts used to teach schoolchildren Latin (Woods’s contribution to ‘Classroom and confession’); Latin legal material (Green’s essay, though the law texts interest him much less in themselves than as cannibalised in more conventionally literary texts); confessors’ manuals (Copeland’s contribution to ‘Classroom and confession’); sermons (Fleming); historical writing, specifically chronicles (Galloway). As a further consequence, the volume has no time for post-Romantic dismissals, like those of W.P. Ker (p. 332), of translated texts, that staple of medieval literature, as inferior to original works.

Another of the volume’s strengths lies in its determination to locate the works in as complete a set of contexts — historical, social, cultural, codicological — as possible. Writers have tended to reify medieval texts, rather than to see them as work-in-progress, ‘œuvres mouvantes’ (p. 111), in a ‘vernacular-in-progress’ (p. 58 n. 71), by writers whose habits of ‘composition and recomposition’ produce textual ‘moments in a fluid revision process’ (pp. 516-7). Such fluidity within and across vernaculars characterises virtually everything produced before the advent of print, and even, if we think of Caxton’s two editions of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, discussed in ‘Caxton’ (Lerer), after it. Where, therefore, previous writers have
tended to read medieval play scripts as if identical with the performances of those scripts, a more judicious reading, like Clopper's, will view them as a series of texts assembled randomly for purposes other than the systematic promotion of any 'clerical agenda' (p. 759): not the simple record of an actual or an intended performance at all.

Chronicles were especially work-in-progress, as Galloway shows; in the early Middle Ages, Geoffrey's Historia, and in the later Middle Ages Higden's Polychronicon, were constantly recycled and continued by later chroniclers (pp. 268, 275). Langland's Piers Plowman, a work whose importance is demonstrated not only by the chapter devoted to it by Kirby-Fulton, but also by regular guest appearances in many other chapters in the volume, is another key instance of this understanding. Other concrete instances of the process show how the mystics revised their own texts (Watson), and Wycliffites sometimes revised orthodox texts (Justice, p. 682), so as to address a wider and more general audience, an audience whom, in some measure, the new textual versions helped into being.

The different idea of a text revealed by all these examples is clearly foregrounded in Lawton's study on the key text of the Middle Ages, the Bible, which was commonly transmitted in fragmentary form (p. 455), and, in Cummings's words, 'appropriated by government and dissident, nobleman and labourer ... bishop and radical, for mutually divisive ends' (p. 845). Lawton also reminds us that the medieval text is not to be understood as enjoying an identity separate from its own framing commentary, or even from its oral delivery and interpretation (p. 463). His understanding is given particular point when More argues in his Dialogue Concerning Heresies against Tyndale's insistence on the primacy of the written text of the Bible, and Tyndale replies, with his Answer to More, against More's 'improvisatory but radical attack on the grapheme in favour of the phoneme' (p. 835: that is, the Bible for More exists only in the total teaching context of the Church).

This considerably more generous understanding of the subject enables the volume to bring into clearer focus a number of works and writers that conventional literary studies usually pass over in silence: notably, the Domesday Book (1085-87), a text which, a hundred years after its making, had acquired 'a mythic resonance and iconic status' (p. 124), and to which the tenants of Mildenhall appealed in the thirteenth century in order to rebuff monastic claims to lordship of the demesne (p. 436); a twelfth-century writer whose modern pseudonym, in Hahn's telling phrase, 'crystallizes the associations of disability and disembodiment that swirl around e[arly] M[iddle] E[nglish] writing' (p. 73), the Tremulous Hand of Worcester — in particular, a fragment transcribed by him, the so-called First Worcester Fragment; John Trevisa and his patron Lord Berkeley (pace Marvin, in his useful 'Chronological Outline', Trevisa's date of birth is not 1326 but 'c. 1342'); the
Constitutions of Archbishop Arundel (1407-9), a text which prohibited 'translation of "any text of holy scripture" into English, "by means of book, booklet or treatise"' and whose malign influence on literary developments in the fifteenth century is attested when, for example, 'possession of The Canterbury Tales' was used in evidence against a suspect (p. 676). Such textual figures are consistent with the book's emphasis on the politics of literary production; they can also focus the volume's lively awareness of the centrality of translation in the project of creating and maintaining a sense of self- and national identity.

Admittedly, there are losers as well as winners in this rewriting of conventional literary certainties. The volume finds little space for the study of science and medicine to complement the chapter on law, though Hanna, for one, identifies scientific translations of the 1370s as being among the first products of what we might call the translation revolution at the end of the century (p. 499). Within the work's own terms of reference, similarly, one might have looked for more comment on Reginald Pecock. Pecock's importance has been energetically argued elsewhere by Watson, and Justice notes that Pecock's writing is 'perhaps the most impressive accomplishment of Middle English intellectual prose' (p. 687); yet Pecock barely gains a toehold in the volume (the index gives him a reference at p. 361 which should actually be 362). So too Robert Grosseteste, probably the greatest translator in England in the high Middle Ages, and a figure whose enthusiastic support of the requirements of the Fourth Lateran Council for a religiously-educated laity, and whose later critical relation to Papal authority, made him a totem for orthodox and heretic alike. Though Marvin's 'Chronological outline' acknowledges his importance as a translator (p. 860), he appears in the body of the text only as the author of a pastoral manual, a courtesy poem and an Anglo-Norman allegory translated into Middle English; as the owner of a large collection of books; and as a bishop with a strong sense of the pastoral responsibilities of his clergy.

More strikingly, the Gawain poet is largely absent. Even in that chapter where he would seem to be most assured of a home, Hanna's on alliterative poetry, his work appears only in relation to the later stanzacic Adventures of Arthur at Tarn Wadling (p. 496) and as instantiating general observations about favoured narrative structures and overarching thematic preoccupations of the texts under consideration (pp. 504-6). Granted, Hanna's revisionist approach requires him to challenge the standard Old-Historicist view, also challenged in passing by Cannon (p. 325), of an alliterative revival in the late fourteenth century. Granted, too, Hanna refers to a large number of texts, including many not normally given house-room because temporally or geographically remote from the poetry of that 'revival'. As with Olson's work on Chaucer, though, Hanna's beautifully argued paper may take too much for granted of the ground on which beginning students need to build.
The volume has a surprising sprinkling of misprints: the same quotations from the same primary sources sometimes miscopy their texts (eg pp. 85/330, 23/323). Though beginning readers will welcome the glosses provided for texts in Latin, French and early Middle English, they will sometimes be misled by the offered versions: in their two contributions to Section I, for example, Lérer, and Johnson and Wogan-Browne, use different translations of the Brut, by Madden and Allen respectively, to accompany quotations from the original. The latter's use of the first person plural possessive pronoun ('our') at places where the original does not have it, defensible by reference to Allen's decision to retain the alliterative form of the original as far as possible, nevertheless begs a question of fundamental importance in the rest of the volume (whose England? whose English?).

Minor errors of detail also occur. (1) Clopper argues (p. 769) that Christ is speaking of the Immaculate Conception in the N-Town play 'Christ among the Doctors'. This contested doctrine certainly appears, in the first of the Mary plays in the N-Town cycle, in the 'kusse of clennesse' which Joachim gives to Anna at the moment of the Virgin's conception, but Jesus in the temple is almost certainly speaking of his own virginal conception and birth. (2) The St. Elizabeth whose life is recorded in Bodleian Library MS Douce 114 is not, as Boffey claims (p. 633), the Elizabeth of Hungary to whom were credited a set of revelations, and of whom Margery Kempe knew, but the Elizabeth of Spalbeck whose identification with the crucifixion leads her to fierce self-flagellation (given the problems of identifying the former, it won't do to assert too positively that a medieval reader like Margery could never have confused the two.) As a way of showing her orthodoxy, Margery appeals directly to such models, like 'Boneventur'; we should probably understand this as a reference to the supposed author of the Stimulus Amoris, since that text is named in her work, rather than the equally suppositious author of the Meditationes Vitae Christi (so Boffey, p. 632), a work clearly influential upon Margery, but not named directly by her. (3) The Bibliography needs a full reference to Baugh's edition of A Worcestershire Miscellany (p. 326 n.61). (4) There is occasional mismatch of citation between chapters. Hanna modernises the accepted title of Mum and the Sothsegger; Green and Kirby-Fulton do not. (5) The dates offered in Marvin's 'Chronological outline' sometimes fail to match those in the body of the text: Justice dates Clanvowe's Book of Cupid 1389 (p. 673), Marvin c. 1385; the Long Version of Julian's 'showings', conventionally dated shortly after 1393, appears in the 'Outline', on the strength of a temporal marker in its last chapter, as c. 1388, though this date refers specifically to the revelation given in that chapter, fifteen years after the revelations were first given in 1373, and a temporal marker in chapter 52 shows that the work as a whole must have been composed at least 'xx years' after the revelations were first given.

There are also points at which disagreement, or at least question, is possible.
(1) Cooper alleges a distinctive association of English romance with male readers (women readers are by contrast more likely to own French romances), but the very exception that she cites to test her case, Chaucer, contains, in the mouth of the Nun’s Priest, an ironic reference to female attachment to the Lancelot story, and raises the question: if female readers of romance were the exception, why does Chaucer take the trouble to satirise them? Boffey seems to me nearer the mark in speculating (p. 622) that ‘saints’ lives, like pious romances, might have been essentially a woman’s genre’; Field uses the same Chaucerian proof-text in the context of a nuanced view of differences between courtly and provincial readers of French and native English (Anglo-Norman, Middle English) romance. (2) Hahn’s gloss of the word ‘hyne’ in the line ‘hwile thu hyne witest under thine hemme’ (p. 79), from the Luve Ron of Thomas of Hales, may refer indeed to the female religious reader’s virginity, but might also refer, along with other masculine third person accusative pronouns in this section of the poem, to Christ himself; Thomas’s inconsistencies of pronominal usage would then point excitingly to his argued connection between Christ’s love and the reader’s virginity.

This is, nevertheless, a book to read, and read again. It should have, and deserves to have, a very long life.