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Lisa H. Cooper and Andrea Denny-Brown (eds.), *Lydgate Matters. Poetry and Material Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 223 pp.; 2 b/w ills., £42.50. ISBN-13: 978-1-4039-7674-1

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Reviewed by Alessandra Petrina

Lydgate Matters is the latest of a small but constant stream of publications that, in recent years, have attested to sustained critical interest in the fifteenth-century poet. The *matter* of Lydgate appears to be of more relevance to cultural historians than literary critics; it is perhaps to be regretted that readings of Lydgate still depend on Derek Pearsall's dictum that his vast output 'needs understanding as a historical phenomenon'. Unsurprisingly, D. Vance Smith writes in his conclusion to the present book that 'it has taken almost forty years, but Lydgate is finally recovering from Pearsall' (p. 185). The present volume, a collection of essays centring on a discussion of 'what his poetry has to teach us about the role of the material – in quite a number of senses – in the later Middle Ages' (p. 1) once more evokes the familiar paradox: an excellent pretext for discussions on social issues, material culture, political and religious controversy or the development of humanism in England, Lydgate's poetic output seems of less relevance as a text. Taken as an object of study, it mutates and vanishes, mirroring the changing influence it exercised in its immediate afterlife; this is shown by the political use to which *The Fall of Princes* was put once completed, or the fate of the religious poems, no longer published in English for a long time after 1534. This interpretation, however, may also become a limitation for literary critics; when Michelle Warren writes that 'material culture offers an especially effective means of dismantling the aesthetic hierarchies that have made 'style' the basis of literary history' (p. 113) she is not only somewhat forcing the theoretical point, but also offering an unnecessary alibi for Lydgate scholars. To take up once more Warren's words, the analysis of materialism does not challenge the idea of mediocrity as applied to Lydgate's work; it simply removes the issue.

By setting matter at its centre, the editors of this volume have made an intelligent choice, granting a unifying theme while leaving scope for more traditional literary investigation. David Lawton's influential article 'Dullness and the Fifteenth Century' (1987) asked scholars to reconsider the rhetorical attitude of fifteenth-century poets, whose distance from more familiar models has for a long time blinded modern readers to the late medieval writers' use of the humility topos as a strategy to enter the public arena, re-defining from the start the relation between poet and patron or – the great novelty of the English fifteenth century – between the poem and its public consumption. Lawton's suggestion is taken up by Claire Sponsler in the opening essay of the collection, which moves from Lydgate's status as a monk to discuss the controversial issue of his impact on contemporary readers. As a writer belonging to an elite culture and writing primarily for an elite audience, Lydgate requires a radical re-drawing of the boundaries between elite and popular culture, given that in a number of instances (the most important being the surprising popularity of *The Fall of Princes*, attested by the number of extant manuscripts) his influence appears to have gone well beyond his intended audience; Sponsler proposes to examine the apparent paradox 'by moving beyond the idea of imagined publics to an examination of the actual audiences for Lydgate's public poems' (p. 15). Her analysis focuses on Lydgate's writing for public entertainments, in the context of London's idiosyncratic approach to civic festivities as an articulation of the relationship between the city and central political power. The evidence for Sponsler's analysis is unfortunately limited essentially to Lydgate's own texts and to Shirley's or Stow's comments or reactions;

there is very little specific information on the circumstances in which, for instance, Lydgate's mummings were played. The critic, however, proposes a new and refreshing reading of the authorial voice in the entertainments, referring also to John Shirley's Lydgatean manuscripts and their circulation. In the end little is proved beyond the fact that 'Lydgate's entertainments for Londoners speak only falteringly in a common voice' (p. 27), but the impression of this reader is that the critic, constrained within the limit of a relatively short essay, makes here a number of suggestions towards a more comprehensive re-assessment of these texts.

Andrea Denny-Brown considers *Bycorne and Chychevache*, setting it in the tradition of misogynistic texts, while analysing its collocation within a larger discourse on virtues and vices, particularly avarice and *coveitise*. The richness of its references to French and English texts, and the exploration of contemporary visual references, help the reader to a clearer understanding of this often forgotten poem. Denny-Brown links the theme of devouring to wider issues of physical and spiritual appetite, and to ritual fasting in the liturgical year. The connection suggested between this motif and an anti-Lollard polemic (as Lollard sermons would not advocate fasting, which could engender avarice) appears tenuous, as it is worked out simply through the use of a word, *chyncherie*, which has obvious phonetic analogies with Chichevache, but has too few occurrences in late-medieval English literature to possess authentic evocative power. The link between *chyncherie* and the adoration of false gods is likewise strained, so that the representation of Lydgate's monstrous beasts as 'golden cows' is not altogether convincing. Denny-Brown's reading highlights the fundamental dichotomy between Lydgate's frequent recourse to occasional poems as a favourite form of literary expression and the critical attempt to reconstruct the poet's production as ideologically consistent.

London comes back as a central theme in Paul Strohm's essay, which connects 'Lydgate's view of a purified city, a city of grand vistas and improved thoroughfares' (p. 59) to the problem of sewage in the large and royal medieval city. Strohm discusses the practical as well as symbolic values associated with a clean and well-flushed city, moving to an analysis of the *Troy Book* as an enactment of the metaphor of cleansing applied to the body politic. The episode he focuses on is the preservation of Hector's body after his death – a nice instance of microcosm in that Lydgate, making use of Galenic theory, goes beyond Guido's original and turns the dead and preserved body into an instance of vegetable, autonomous life. The next step is a parallel between the Priam-Hector relationship and the one between Chaucer and Lydgate, by which point we have moved rather far from London. The critic's elegance of style and ease of reference carry through what might have been a perilous tour de force; the analogy between the well-plumbed city and the well-irrigated colon is successfully established, re-affirming Lydgate's status as political poet. Washing and cleansing come back as the subjects of Maura Nolan's essay, concentrating on what the critic calls 'Lydgate's worst poem', the 'Tretise for Lauandres'. The essay is a fine counterpoint to Strohm's: the metaphor of cleanliness is successfully employed to express Lydgate's ideology, this time on the religious rather than the civic level. Nolan uses both text analysis and a survey of manuscript collocation and circulation, strengthening her hypothesis and applying it to a wider corpus of Lydgatean poems. Set together, the two essays affirm the centrality of the preoccupation with purgation in Lydgate's thought. This allows Nolan a memorable concluding passage on the relationship between modern readers and medieval manuscripts that brings forth a compelling evaluation of 'the true density of the medieval poem' (p. 84): it is one of the high points of this volume.

We go back to Lydgate's longer and more famous poems with Lisa Cooper's essay, which studies the *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man* as an instance of estates literature and of anti-Lollard propaganda. The wide scope of this analysis is perhaps responsible for some lack of focus and a few repetitions; Lydgate's poem, a translation of Deguileville's even more complex text, is a formidable challenge, and the introduction of comparisons with manuscript illuminations and contemporary texts such as Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes* does not always help to clarify the issue, nor does the critic establish a significant difference in ideological content between the *Pilgrimage* and its source text. The same problem with focus seems to besiege the following essay, Michelle Warren's comparison of Lydgate's texts with the literary production of Henry Lovelich, skinner and minor poet. Warren identifies 'craft' as one of the themes of a group of Lydgate's poems that highlight the connection between the writer and the London world of artisans, and identifies common trends between Lovelich's belonging to an old and influential London guild (which included members of the royal family) and Lydgate's literary activity for the London merchant class. But some of the lines along which the comparison is worked are generic (the fact that both poets depended on patronage reflects little more than the common trend of English literary life at the time) and the references to disparate fields of enquiries, from manuscript analysis to historicism to work on metric and 'style' do not help a rather weak case.

Moving to the opposite end of the spectrum, Jennifer Floyd takes as subject matter of her work a tiny detail, John Shirley's allusion to a 'steyned halle' in his headnote to Lydgate's *Legend of St George*. More than one contributor in this volume refers to John Shirley and uses his words as evidence, which shows how far an investigation of Lydgatean *matters* should take into account material that is marginal to the poetic texts: notes, illuminations, iconographic material, manuscript evidence and historic background all help to illuminate the yet underestimated achievement of one of the most rewarding poets of late medieval England, as well as, Floyd notes, 'a key player in the London scene' (p. 141). Floyd's analysis starts from a fundamentally unproven hypothesis – that Lydgate's *Legend* was written to be inscribed on the textile to which the expression 'steyned halle' refers – but in spite of the tenuousness of the premise, it allows her an interesting exploration of the role of guilds (in this case, the London Armourers') in contemporary literary production. As in the case of the previous essay, it is a welcome reminder that medieval patronage is not a prerogative of the aristocracy and the church.

After this long excursus on Lydgate the Londoner, John Ganim's essay brings back to us Lydgate the monk, dedicated to a defence and definition of his abbey, Bury St Edmunds, in the lines of the two poems he

dedicated to the abbey's patron saint. Through a description of Bury's status and role in contemporary politics, Ganim sheds light on the role one of its most famous sons played, through his commissioned and occasional poetry, in the negotiations of power in contemporary England. It is a proof of this critic's range of reference and critical acumen that the analysis also serves as a vindication of Lydgate's poetic ability. It should also be noted that, unlike what happens in other essays in the collection, here Lydgate's poetry is discussed as a form of archival record rather than a performative adjunct to civic and religious activities – yet another point on which future Lydgate studies would do well to elaborate, as it fits so unexpectedly well with his activity as a translator. D. Vance Smith's concluding essay seems to take up Ganim's challenge by offering, at last, a full-bodied evaluation of Lydgate's writing in literary terms, inscribing his poem within 'this persistence of the presence ... a charming, even heroic, refusal to submit to its aporia' (p. 186) that constitutes a triumphant vindication of the medieval poet's modernity.

If this volume prompts more questions than it answers, this is surely a good sign: other recent contributions, acknowledged in this volume, have shown critical restlessness in the matter of Lydgate. There is still much work to be done, not least towards a clearer definition of the Lydgate canon and a still lacking overall assessment of his work; but there is little doubt that the essays included here suggest new and stimulating directions for Lydgate criticism, and implicitly a rereading of the 'dull' fifteenth century.

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