

Reviews

Article

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REVIEWS

John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse. Confronting Famine, War, Plague and Death in the Later Middle Ages*, London, Routledge, 2000, xiv + 304pp. ISBN 0-415-92715-3. Hardback £15.99.

This is a lively account of contemporary reactions in apocalyptic terms to plague, war, famine, rebellion, and especially death, in the later middle ages. It forms part of the movement to re-vitalise the medieval period and stands as a corrective to the pessimistic interpretations of events in works such as Johan Huizinga's *Waning of the Middle Ages*. The focus is on England in a European context and it is illustrated with black and white pictures and maps, and laced with quotations from a variety of sources. The result is a novel and vivid picture of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Margaret Yates
Reading

Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, 295pp. ISBN 0-19-811209-2.

This erudite study begins with an examination of incest in medieval law, both in theory and observance. Particularly important here is the definition of the term, which was understood in a much wider sense than it would be today. However, the main part of the book concerns the forms of incest which we would still categorise as such: mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, siblings. Analysis of the medieval texts is preceded by a chapter on the classical legacy, looking at those classical incest stories, including of course that of Oedipus, which would have been known in the middle ages. Some of the medieval tales analysed in the following chapters are clearly based on the classical tales, frequently with doubling of motifs. The

author distinguishes between intentional and accidental incest in her categorisation. The chapter on Father-daughter incest focuses on La Manekine and the theme of mutilation, whether self-inflicted or forced on the female. A considerable part of the chapter on Siblings and other relatives is centred on the conception of Mordred. The legend surrounding Charlemagne and the birth of Roland is also considered here, with acknowledgement that the earliest reference to this is mid-13th century, though the author appears to accept that the tradition is earlier (a debatable point). Archibald concludes that 'medieval writers were surprisingly gender-blind in the incest stories' (p.234). In her analysis it is apparent that different gender roles are ascribed but that the guilt or blame is evenly divided. Towards the end of the book the author looks forward briefly to how things would develop in the Renaissance period. The study includes texts written in a number of languages; namely, Old French, Middle English, Latin, and Old Norse, with modern English translations provided. The narratives, which frequently resemble one another, often have to be summarised before any analysis can take place. Locating the texts firmly in both historical and literary contexts, this is a truly interdisciplinary study. An impressively comprehensive bibliography and an appendix offering synopses of the 'flight from incest' narratives complete the work.

Marianne Ailes
Oxford

Helen Cooney, ed., *Nation, Court and Culture: New Essays on Fifteenth-Century English Poetry*, Dublin and Portland, Four Courts Press, 2001. 191 pp; 7 plates. ISBN 1-85182-566-5; £50.

Critical moves to reassess the English literature of the fifteenth century are given fresh impetus by this wide-ranging and stimulating collection. The volume focuses particularly on the poetic traditions of the period, seeking to formulate new criteria by

which the productions of Lydgate, Hoccleve and Skelton may be analysed in a criticism free from the language of 'dullness', 'decay' and 'decline' bequeathed to literary historians and medievalists by Johan Huizinga and C.S. Lewis. More than one familiar narrative is productively challenged in this anthology. Derek Pearsall's initial essay displaces a picture of the inevitable rise of English language and nationhood, suggesting instead that both were established not steadily and inexorably but in fits and starts. This alternate picture of an English literary culture only tenuously established does much to illuminate the self-conscious, hesitant or, as Cooney suggests, 'drede-ful' tenor of much of the literary output of the period. Essays by John Scattergood and Phillipa Hardman take up the concept of nationhood, the former in an analysis of the national consciousness evident in the *Libelle of Englysche Polycye*, and the latter in a stimulating study of the differing degrees of national sentiment discernible in three manuscript miscellanies spanning the century. Essays by John Burrow and John J. Thompson demonstrate again how the case study of Thomas Hoccleve alone ought to temper any conception of the 'dullness' of fifteenth-century English verse, the respective essays here placing the writer in relation to the English 'court' broadly defined, and in the metropolitan manuscript culture of late medieval London. The closing essays of the volume present a strong case for the vitality of certain literary forms in the period. Julia Boffey demonstrates how dream-vision complaints take on deeper resonance when situated within contemporary legal practice for the presentation of petitions of grievance by women. Likewise Tony Davenport brings his expertise in the complaint form to bear on fifteenth-century examples, finding a capacity in the form for political inflection towards issues of public concern. The editor's own essay persuasively reads Skelton's *Bowge of Court* as a self-reflective text, one which explores the very tenability of the allegorical form in a changing cultural climate which favoured a new philological humanism inimical to allegory. Fittingly the volume concludes with an essay by Douglas Gray, a scholar whose previous work has

done so much to prompt the critical shift to which this anthology is witness. In addressing himself to the corpus of fifteenth-century lyrics and carols, Gray once again provides ample demonstration of the range and diversity of the tradition, of its potential for much more than dogged adherence to inherited forms, showing instead 'a living tradition of considerable diversity and distinction'. The anthology concludes with an index of names and generic headings and a separate index of manuscripts consulted. A rather high number of typographical errors and omissions, often appearing in clusters, tend to distract (e.g. p.36; p.39, p.112; p.114). But these are minor blemishes in an impressive and important volume which presents compelling arguments as to why the English literature of the fifteenth century might now speak to us more forcibly than ever before.

Roger Dalrymple
Oxford

Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy. Authority and the Interpretation of Texts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 296pp. ISBN 0-521-80720-4.

In his study of *The Wycliffite Heresy*, Ghosh argues that the importance of Lollardy came from its identification and exploitation of fundamental problems within late medieval academic biblical hermeneutics. Debates over academic engagement with the Bible were conducted both inside and outside the universities, and this, Ghosh contends, enabled the Wycliffite heresy to elide the boundary between Latin biblical speculation and vernacular religiosity. Ghosh's assertion of the importance of Wycliffe's attempt to reclaim the Scriptures from academic glossing, and to rediscover the lost truths of Christ and the ecclesia primitiva, is firmly rooted in Wycliffe's key text, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, which provides the focus for the first chapter. However, Ghosh makes use of a variety of other Wycliffite and

orthodox texts across a fifty year period, discussing: Wycliffe's own writings and debates in the 1370s and 1380s; sermons; and Thomas Netter's condemnation of Lollard heresy in *Doctrinale Antiquitatum Fidei*. In this sense, this book does persuade the reader of the centrality of the Wycliffite heresy to the intellectual world of late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century England. Despite the argument for the 'unprecedented Lollard achievement of converting into popular vernacular currency ideas traditionally confined to an academic Latinate mint', this is primarily a study of the academic context and consequences of the Wycliffite heresy. Little attention is given to what might be termed 'popular' Lollardy, other than to note that the aggressive response of church and state is indicative of the real and potent threat posed to orthodoxy. Ghosh's study benefits from his determination to place Wycliffite writings in their academic context, giving ample space to Love and Netter's condemnations of heresy, and emphasising the degree of dialogue and debate in late-medieval religious controversy. Yet it is not made immediately clear what impact this dialogue had upon Ghosh's 'extra-mural' audience. The vernacular heresy that testifies to the broad appeal of Wycliffite hermeneutics is concealed here beneath the scholarly analysis of the Latin debate over authority. The discussion of the 294 Wycliffite sermons in chapter 4 goes some way towards illuminating attempts to translate the university debates for a vernacular following, but the people in the pews are notably absent from the analysis. However, Ghosh's study is still an impressive account of debates over authority and biblical interpretation in fourteenth century England, and one which should help to fulfil his hope that late medieval intellectual history may receive more attention from scholars on both sides of the medieval / renaissance divide.

Helen Parish
Reading

Jonathan Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades*, London and New York, Hambledon and London, 2003, xvii + 259pp. ISBN 1-85285-298-4.

This is a book which no historian of the crusades will be able to ignore. Jonathan Harris challenges both the well established theories about the origins of the Fourth Crusade, arguing that the clashes between Byzantium and Western crusaders were made inevitable by the ideology of the Byzantine Empire itself. It never saw itself as a crusading state and was not obsessed with the idea of recapturing the cities intimately associated with the birth of Christianity. It was far more concerned with securing its role as guardian of the holy places in the Levant and recognition of its role in preserving the legacy of Rome. Coupled with this failure to understand the desire of the westerners to secure physical possession of the territories associated with Christ and his apostles was the Byzantines' unassailable conviction of their own superiority as the heirs of the Roman empire. This meant constant tension with the western emperors. Harris traces the developing conflict between eastern and western Christians from the earliest periods of the break up of the Roman Empire. He shows how Byzantine diplomacy evolved over the centuries almost always following tried and tested tactics. These could include aggressive wars, as in the tenth century when John I Tzimisce campaigned as far south as Caesarea but did not annexe the conquered southern provinces establishing the Byzantine frontier in northern Syria. They also made full use of bribery, factionalism amongst the enemy, diplomacy and offers of submission and nominal overlordship. According to Harris the breach between east and west became ever wider as the Papacy became more confident and demanding, and the Byzantines failed to notice the changes that were taking place in the west. They were also slow to realise that their traditional diplomacy could be counter productive in the changed conditions of the crusades, as the westerners resented what they saw as Greek treachery and arrogance. As a result neither

Alexios I nor his son John were as successful as they might have been in their dealings with the west. Under John's son Manuel I, a strong and confident ruler, who was more open to Latin influence, Byzantine diplomacy started to adapt successfully to the rising power of the crusaders. In the twenty-five year chaos that followed the death of Manuel Byzantine diplomacy, when it was active at all, fell back on its traditional tactics which resulted only in the alienation of the increasingly powerful papacy and empire. By 1204 the view of the West was that the Byzantines had failed to honour their commitments, were unfit to rule their empire and that their revenues would provide the money necessary to complete the fourth Crusade. In this way Harris argues that the traditional explanations for the fourth Crusade, the theory of the chain of accidents and the theory of the conspiracy amongst the westerners to attack Constantinople from the beginning, can be discarded. He is perhaps a little too inclined to dismiss counter arguments with the comment that they are not convincing, but his own argument is solidly based and carefully referenced. There are two points worth making about his book. The internecine feuds at the Byzantine court after the death of Manuel and the ever-increasing separatism manifesting itself in the provinces are not really given their full weight. Not only did they weaken the Greek ability to resist the West but they also contributed to the appalling impression which the West had of the Greeks. Secondly, each note tends to contain several, sometimes many, references covering various points in his argument. Anyone not well versed in the different sources and critics will struggle to be sure which reference refers to which point. Despite these comments, this is a book which is fascinating and extremely useful. It is succinct, clear, to the point – not only essential reading for any historian of the crusades or Byzantium but also a pleasure to read.

Peter Noble
Reading

Edward Donald Kennedy, ed., *King Arthur: A Casebook*, New York and London, Routledge, 2002, (first published 1996), lvi + 311pp. ISBN 0-8153-0495-1.

The reissue of this collection of essays is extremely welcome as it is essential reading for anyone interested in Arthurian studies. Most of the essays are equally accessible to the beginner and the experienced scholar although there are one or two which are very technical and require an in-depth knowledge of the background. Professor Kennedy has provided a brilliant introduction which ranges across the whole range of the essays, tracing the development of the legend and explaining the significance of the essays. Some of the essays are already well-known to experienced scholars but it is useful to have the essays by Barbara Sargent-Bauer, Elspeth Kennedy and Fanni Bogdanow in English translation. The essays written for this volume by Marylyn Jackson Parins, William McDonald, Debra Mancoff and Raymond Thompson are all important contributions shedding new light on different aspects of the Arthurian legend. Mancoff's article on the use of the legend in Victorian art is particularly worth reading, while Parins's 'Looking for Arthur' is a valuable account of the competing theories about the origins of the legend. Of the older essays those by James Carley and Fanni Bogdanow are particularly stimulating, while the article by Merritt Hughes on Spenser shows clearly the intensity of the post World War II academic debate on the role of Arthur in the *Faerie Queene*. There are only two misprints that I detected, p.9., line 12 'insured' for 'ensured' and p. 38 where in the translation of the quotation 'preparatioMns' has survived the checking.

Rachael Lazenby
Reading

Gillian R. Knight, *The Correspondence between Peter the Venerable and Bernard of Clairvaux. A Semantic and Structural Analysis.* (Church, Faith and Culture in the Medieval West), Ashgate, 2002, xii + 303pp (bibliography, pp. 283-296). ISBN 0-7546-0067-X.

The book deals with the correspondence between two great and influential figures of the medieval world – Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny (1122-1156), and Bernard, abbot of Clairvaux (1115-1153). Peter was the head of the powerful Cluniac congregation, spread throughout Western Europe, who was entrusted with the leadership of a magnificent abbey and dependent monasteries, but also represented a rather reactionary monastic institution. Bernard, on the contrary, became the founder-abbot of the new monastery of Clairvaux and then the supreme leader of the new reforming order, the Cistercians, who also ‘conquered’ Europe.

The correspondence between these two giants of medieval monasticism, as an aspect of a dispute between two monastic principles and codes, has been the subject of a number of works. But Knight’s splendid book offers a new and fresh approach. She has focused on the extant twenty-two letters composed from ca. 1127 to May 1152. Knight did not intend to reconstruct the actual historical relationship between these two monastic prelates and leaders of Western Christendom. She rather offers an erudite deconstruction of their epistolary relationship in the context of the entire letter-collections of these authors as well as of the tradition of letter-writing. Her profound knowledge of Latin is reflected in detailed analyses of words, specific terms or expressions used by the two authors. Knight presents the letters exchanged between Peter the Venerable and Bernard of Clairvaux on: matters regarding disputes between the two Orders; contemporary problems of the Church; monastic reforms (tithes, episcopal elections, papal schism); moral and theological questions; and both social and military aspects of the Second Crusade (1147-1148). The dynamics

of the correspondence was often stimulated by travels or visits undertaken by the authors (e.g. Bernard's to Cluny over the Christmas period of 1150).

But Knight does not limit her analysis only to the medieval context. She presents the literary output of the two abbots against a background of the classical ancient writers, Latin patristic authorities and naturally the Bible itself. This certainly helps the reader to understand the importance of the letters in question as well as the different approaches of Peter the Venerable and Bernard of Clairvaux. It is worth stressing that Knight often engages with the other historians who have previously dealt with the Peter-Bernard correspondence, presenting her own intriguing opinions. Knight's book surely proves that she is expert in the fields, not only of medieval and modern historiography, but also of modern literary analysis.

Rafal Witkowski
Poznan

S.H. Rigby, ed., *A Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, xviii + 665 pp. ISBN 0-631-21785-1. Hardback £85/\$124.95.

This is an important and authoritative collection of essays that has produced a comprehensive overview of the history of Britain in the later middle ages. The editor's aim was to help the general and student reader to begin making sense of the mass of literature published on the economic, social, political, religious and cultural history of Britain in the later middle ages; to introduce them to the major themes in British history c.1100-c.1500; and familiarize them with some of the most influential approaches and perspectives with which historians have attempted to make sense of the period (p. xvi). This aim is fully realised and we are presented with a work that is accessible to anyone interested in the medieval period.

The essays are grouped into four thematic sections where they are further subdivided for specialist treatment into England,

Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. The collection works best when the contributors closely follow their brief and give a historiographical review of their subject, discourse on the current state of research, and provide an annotated bibliography. The authors are all experts and write with authority on their topics and, although there is understandably greater emphasis given to the history of England, the result is more comprehensive than many of the current general works that profess to cover the history of Britain.

Part I 'Economy and Society in Town and Country' contains studies of population and the rural economy; towns, trade and industry; social unrest; and specific sections on women and gender, and family life and the village community. Discussions of the upper echelons of society are examined within Part II 'Politics, Government and Law'. This section also includes a masterly review of kingship and the political community covering the whole of Britain. The authors are all distinguished scholars and have endeavoured to provide additional innovative approaches to their treatment of the topics. The strengths of Part III 'The Church and Piety' lie in the descriptions of the contrasting experiences of the different parts of Britain which form the basis for many of the developments of the sixteenth century. In the final section on 'Education and Culture' there are also studies of art history and literature and together these provide fascinating insights into the varied cultures that made up Britain and informed contemporary opinion. The bibliographical guidance and references for each essay are of particular value and establish an overview of the seminal works on the subject and subsequent developments and publications. The result is an invaluable tool for teachers creating reading lists, students undertaking independent research, and anyone wishing to explore a particular topic in greater depth. This collection of essays is an essential work of reference for the history of the later middle ages and a guide to further reading.

Margaret Yates
Reading

Corinne Saunders, ed., *Chaucer: Blackwell Guides to Criticism*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001, xi + 356 pp.; 8 plates. ISBN 0-631-21712-6. Paperback £14.99.

This volume, the first in the new *Blackwell Guides to Criticism* series, aims to provide a comprehensive selection of key critical views of Chaucer's work over the last hundred years. More than an anthology of such contrasting views, the *Guide* includes lucid introductions to each critical extract, relating discrete pieces to wider critical movements and schools of approach. The introductory section provides an expert overview of the dominant trends in Chaucer criticism over the last century, charting the development from the earliest historicist readings of Kittredge and Manly through to the New Critical approaches of the 1950s and the considerable influence of the Robertsonian school of the 1960s onwards. This very helpful overview opens onto a further prefatory section in which critical extracts from such authorities as Brewer and Strohm are drawn upon to illuminate the material conditions in which Chaucer's poetry was written and received.

The central part of the *Guide* follows the three-fold division suggested by the poet's major works: the dream vision poems; the *Canterbury Tales*; and *Troilus* (considerations of space and the book's emphasis on undergraduate studies mean the corpus of shorter lyric poems is necessarily left aside). This arrangement and the incisive editorial commentary make for some very illuminating and stimulating juxtapositions: in the section on *Troilus* the New Criticism of E. Talbot Donaldson shares company with Lee Patterson's critical historicism while the section on the *Canterbury Tales* carries us from Jordan's essay on the aesthetics and unity of the tales to Carolyn Dinshaw's provocative 'Eunuch Hermeneutics'. The expert arrangement of the extracts has the effect that the ultimate object of study, Chaucer's work itself, is

never occluded: the chorus of critical voices orchestrated by the *Guide* gives eloquent witness to the range and resonance of Chaucer's poetry and ought certainly to meet the series' aims of enhancing undergraduates' enjoyment of primary texts whilst broadening the critical repertoire they bring to the encounter.

Accessible both as a reference book and as a valuable account of the development of Chaucer criticism, the book includes a range of illustrations, a detailed index and an extensive bibliography, again carefully organised around genre, critical school or concern. It is this expert arrangement of the material throughout that brings definition and focus to the volume and makes of the *Guide* a rich and valuable resource for undergraduate study.

Roger Dalrymple
Oxford

Joan Tasker Grimbert, ed., *Tristan and Isolde: a Casebook*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002 (first issued 1995), cxviii + 520pp. ISBN 0-415-93910-0.

The reissue of this immense volume of essays is welcome as it will enable students to see rapidly the importance of the Tristan legend in western culture. Four essays were specially commissioned for the volume, 'Radix Amoris: The *Tavola Ritonda* and its Response to Dante's Paolo and Francesca' by Donald Hoffman; 'Tristan in Medieval Art' by Julia Walworth; 'The Most Beautiful of Dreams': 'Tristram and Isoud in British Art of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries' by Christine Poulson; 'Cocteau's Tristan and Iseut: A Case of Overmuch Respect' by Stephen Maddux. All four are stimulating contributions but Poulson's article is particularly illuminating on the importance of the legend in the work of British artists of the mid and late Victorian and Edwardian period. Maddux also writes fascinatingly about why Cocteau's version of the legend is one of his less successful films. Walworth has not been well served by the editor as her article stops abruptly in the middle of a sentence depriving the reader of part of

her conclusion. Amongst the other articles a few stand out for their importance. Among them are McCann's 'Tristan: The Celtic and Oriental Material Re-examined', Bruckner's 'The Representation of the Lovers' Death: Thomas; *Tristan* as Open Text', Mahoney's 'Malory's "Tale of Sir Tristram": Source and Setting Reconsidered' and Harrison's 'Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse*: Visionary and Courtly Epic'. It is easy to query the choice of some of the articles selected, but it seems strange that Rabine's 'Love and the New Patriarchy' or Payen's 'The Glass Palace in the *Folie d'Oxford*' were preferred to Tony Hunt's very important articles on Beroul and Thomas and the article by Renée Curtis on the two *Folies*. These articles are all mentioned in the select bibliography, where, however, the name of the late Lucie Polak is misspelled as it is in the editor's introduction. This is all the more bizarre as McCann cites her correctly. The editor has done a remarkable job in synthesising all the different material in her introduction, although she is clearly more at ease when handling the French material. This is a useful addition to the research materials available on the Tristan legend for both students and more advanced scholars.

Rachael Lazenby
Reading