

**Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards (eds.).** *A Companion to Fifteenth-Century English Poetry*. Cambridge: Brewer, 2013, ix + 244 pp., £ 60.00.

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The seventeen essays of *A Companion to Fifteenth-Century English Poetry* edited by Julia Boffey and Tony Edwards address an advanced readership. The book is divided into three parts: “I: Background and Context” (5–31), “II: Authors” (33–141), and “III: Themes and Genres” (143–236). Towards the end, a very short chronology of the years 1399 to 1558 is offered (237), followed by an index listing the manuscripts mentioned throughout the book (239–240). The *Companion* ends with a helpful general index (241–244) of authors, titles and places.

On the whole, the book is well edited. Only the references to the manuscript index are at times inconsistent, as in some chapters the manuscripts are given according to the libraries’ abbreviated names, but in the index all manuscripts are listed according to the libraries’ locations.<sup>1</sup> The volume does not contain a general bibliography; instead, the chapters end with short bibliographies, which are accurate throughout. My review will cover two chapters in each of the three parts: the two chapters making up Part I, two chapters of Part II on lesser-known authors than Lydgate and Hoccleve, and the two contributions by Andrew King and Julia Boffey of Part III, chosen merely out of personal interest.

In comparison to the other parts, Part I is rather short, consisting of only two essays, and its title “Background and Context” promises more than it provides. Though both essays, covering the topics patronage and manuscript circulation in the 15th century, are well worth reading, I would have wished for an additional, more general introduction to the topic that elaborates on the dates and events that are given in the one-page chronology at the end of the book. Numerous references to the dynastic wars of the 15th century are made throughout the book; so a short summary of the most important incidents and parties involved would have been worthwhile.

The first contribution to Part I, Carol Meale’s “The Patronage of Poetry” (7–20) is a study of Lydgate’s, Hoccleve’s and others’ approaches to their patrons,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Hengwrt’s signature is given as “NLW, MS Peniarth 392 D” on p. 22, but in the index the manuscript cannot be found under National Library of Wales but under Aberystwyth. In a note on p. 22, four manuscripts are quoted that cannot be found in the index at all.

convincingly showing that “patronage took many shapes, and was informed by class and gender, status and wealth. And the language in which it was expressed was just as complex as the factors that determined it” (16).

In his chapter “Forms of Circulation” (21–31), Simon Horobin expounds how the works of Lydgate and Hoccleve were compiled together with those of Chaucer (21–26), who was still the most influential author in the 15th century, and that only after 1532 did the tradition begin to produce single-volume collections of one single author. The chapter closes with the description of important scribes who were not situated in London, though the capital “became increasingly seen as the centre of the book trade throughout the fifteenth century” (26).

Part II offers two essays on Hoccleve, a general one (35–45) and one that is especially dedicated to *The Regiment of Princes* (47–57), and three on Lydgate covering his major poems (59–71), his religious poems (73–85) and his shorter secular poems (87–97). This part concludes with chapters on John Capgrave’s and Osborn Bokenham’s saints’ lives (99–111; see below), on Peter Idley’s and George Ashby’s educational texts (113–125; see below), and on John Audelay and James Ryman (127–141).

Sarah James’s essay examines Capgrave’s verse lives of St Norbert and St Katherine and Bokenham’s *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*. Apart from summarising previous studies, it also offers new insights, e.g. on Capgrave’s humour (104), how he quotes Lollardic discourse (103), and it shows that Bokenham’s work cannot only be read as Yorkist propaganda (105f.). The chapter closes with suggestions for further research; it does not become clear why James restricts herself to what she calls “mainstream ground” (109) though, apparently, there is an “extensive hinterland” (*ibid.*) that could have been explored.

John Scattergood’s is an insightful essay on four educational texts, that is, on Idley’s instructions to his son, Ashby’s *A Prisoner’s Reflections* and two mirrors of princes by the same author. Both Peter Idley and George Ashby were civil servants, “a category of society whose members were becoming increasingly likely to write” (113). Idley’s work seems to be conventional and not very original in its approach – with a “general cast of thinking” (118) – yet, Scattergood makes visible what Idley has to say “about the contingencies of his own society, its pressures and problems” (118). As the title suggests, Ashby wrote his *Reflections* in prison. His report leads from the personal to the general: he tries to keep busy in prison in order to avoid falling into sins like sloth or extreme sadness (121). Scattergood is convinced that Ashby’s two mirrors of princes, *Active Policy of a Prince* and *Dicta et Opiniones Diversorum Philosophorum*, are in fact “part of the same project of advising” (122). They were written for Prince Edward (son of Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou), who in 1471 died in the battle of Tewkesbury (121 f. and 124) together with all Lancastrian hope. According to Scattergood, Ashby’s inten-

tions here are comparable to those in his *Reflections* and to Idley's in his advice to his son:

to assemble and restate what [the authors] saw as the collective wisdom of the ages, insisting on certain continuities of right thinking and morally sound behaviour leading to social unity in contexts that they knew to be unstable and in which the centres of authority were uncertain. (124)

Part III consists of seven chapters. It begins with a chapter on Chaucerian visions (143–155) and continues with insights on historical and political verse (157–169), classical and humanist translations (171–185) and Andrew King's reflections on 15th-century romance (187–197; see below). Further, it offers essays on scientific and encyclopedic verse (199–211), on popular verse tales (213–223; see below) and on the (dis)continuing influence of Middle English poets on those of the 16th century (225–236).

Thematically, Andrew King's intellectually stimulating chapter "Romance" is strongly linked with Horobin's introductory chapter, as much of it is about the circulation of romances in 15th-century manuscripts (esp. 187 f.) and as it descriptively exemplifies Chaucer's continuing influence in relation to verse romances (191–196). After 1400, romance is still "the most widely read and encountered form of narrative" (188). But the significance of the genre manifests itself not only in post-Chaucerian or 15th-century productions, like those of Henry Lovelich (cf. 189), but also in the reception of their 14th-century predecessors that were not written by Chaucer (188 f.). Pervasive influence is attested to two romances of earlier origins: to *Guy of Warwick* and *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, which King reads against the contemporary historical background of the 15th century:

Indeed, the story of the displaced heir struggling to assert his identity and regain his patrimony, present in *Bevis* and in a number of other earlier key romances still circulating in the fifteenth century, must have had a particular striking, if shifting, function in the context of the century's dynastic feuds. (191)

Another historical incident that influenced *Bevis* was the fall of Constantinople in 1453, apparently bringing about "more detailed accounts [...] of Bevis' battles with Saracen foes" (190).

Julia Boffey's chapter "Popular Verse Tales" is dedicated to a genre that somehow evades exact definition. The tales share a relative shortness. Originally, they were predominantly circulated orally, and many of them have survived only by chance on loose sheets or in small booklets (213). Boffey introduces a large number of these short texts, describing their characteristics vividly and making tangible their humour and style. The author also exemplifies the geographical and manuscript circulation of these popular tales; some of them found their way

into mixed anthologies next to more pious works like *The Northern Passion* or extracts from *Confessio Amantis* (218–221): “These collocations suggest that what we might now want to define as a separate genre of the ‘popular’ verse tale did not necessarily have such a distinctive flavour for its medieval readers” (221).

In addition to offering some very readable chapters written by superb authors, *A Companion to Fifteenth-Century English Poetry* also serves its purpose “to provide an overview of the state of scholarship in the field and of the significant issues that have emerged over recent decades when study of fifteenth-century verse has undergone such an extraordinary expansion” (2). With its thematically intertwined chapters, it is a recommendable collection that will have its firm place in university libraries.