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Book Review: Lydgate Matters: Poetry and Material Culture in the Fifteenth Century, edited by Lisa H. Cooper and Andrea Denny-Brown

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LISA H. COOPER and ANDREA DENNY-BROWN, eds., *Lydgate Matters: Poetry and Material Culture in the Fifteenth Century*. (The New Middle Ages.) New York and Basingstoke, Eng.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Pp. iii, 223; black-and-white figures. \$74.95.

Yes, Lydgate does matter. Following on a sudden outpouring of influential essays and books on Lydgate, this volume demonstrates definitively that Lydgate's poetry is of central importance to scholars of late-medieval English literature. It does so, among other ways, by showing that his oeuvre can sustain a collection of essays on a single theme, in this case "material culture." It therefore eschews the condescension that trailed Lydgate scholarship in previous eras, though there may be a residual trace of it in the introduction. Invoking David Lawton, who helped to revive interest in fifteenth-century poetry by embracing its "dullness," Cooper and Denny-Brown express their interest in Lydgate's "mundanity," as if to accept his reputation for plodding prolixity. But their true goal is to recuperate Lydgate's reputation by focusing on his engagement with "materiality." And they are thoroughly successful. Rarely does one find a collection of essays that is so thematically cohesive without sacrificing variety, insight, or theoretical adventurousness.

This cohesion derives from the sophisticated way—at once playful and serious—that the editors and contributors approach the topic of material culture. Their focus is not exclusively or even primarily on objects. All the essays share some interest in the physical reality of Lydgate's world, but most often the materiality in question is the space of presentation or the medium of transmission; these issues have been central to much of the recent criticism on Lydgate, but they come into greater focus here than ever before.

Claire Sponsler, whose work has laid much of the groundwork for this approach, surveys the historical contexts of Lydgate's various performance pieces as well as their manuscript legacies to show that the public of Lydgate's poetry was a relatively narrow and elite one, as opposed to the broadly inclusive vision often claimed for Ricardian poetry. Denny-Brown situates *Bycorne and Chychevache* in a poetic tradition concerned not only with gender but also with the morality of consumption, ultimately showing Lydgate's poem to address the moral parameters of the individual's existence in the material world, navigating extremes of indulgence and abstention.

Paul Strohm offers an exemplary work of New Historicism, linking medieval London's efforts at effective sewage and sanitation to Lydgate's idealized Troy and to contemporary discourses of royal authority and the body politic, while also assimilating Giorgio Agamben's theories of sovereignty into more conventional critical discourses of power. Maura Nolan, following the success of her monograph on Lydgate, sets herself the challenge of redeeming what she calls in her title "Lydgate's Worst Poem," the "Treatise for Lauandres," a brief instructional poem for washerwomen. And lo, she pulls it off. Tracing both the poem's verbal tropes and the manuscript evidence for its reception history, Nolan successfully demonstrates that this poem is a "literary" work—that is, deliberately polysemous, in a way that was recognizable to contemporary readers; what is more, she offers a brief but profound meditation on the tension between the materiality of manuscripts and the immateriality of literary texts.

Cooper draws on the work of Michael Camille to read Lydgate's *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man* as an anti-Lollard critique, exploiting associations of artisans with heretics. As if the bar for rescuing poets and texts from obscurity were not by this point high enough, Michelle Warren draws our attention to Henry Lovelich, "who has been ignored even by

those dedicated to the analysis of dullness” (p. 113). Warren links Lovelich to Lydgate through the material culture of literary patronage and manuscript production. Jennifer Floyd studies the material medium of Lydgate’s “Legend of St. George” and the physical space of the London Armorers Guild to elucidate the poetry of public display at the heart of so much of Lydgate’s minor poetry, and of so many of the essays in this collection. John Ganim also analyzes the importance of space and place to Lydgate, and he makes the further contribution of considering the space of the monastery alongside that of the city. Focusing on Lydgate’s poems of St. Edmund, Ganim finds Lydgate attempting to incorporate into urbanism the timeless stillness of the monastic ideal.

In a rich afterword D. Vance Smith makes the case that Lydgatean syntax, the crux of criticism of his overall style, confounds modern expectations because of its different but valuable sense of time. It is the most audacious and ingenious attempt to date to recuperate Lydgate’s stylistics. But I do think Smith oversteps when he asserts that the “chapters in this book testify . . . to an embrace of the very pathological traits in Lydgate’s writing that [Derek] Pearsall identified” (p. 185). On the evidence of this volume, criticism is not changing its mind but shifting its focus. For centuries, to consider Lydgate was to study his *magna opera*, and it was in these that Pearsall diagnosed those familiar stylistic pathologies. The essays here focus almost exclusively on the shorter poetry. There is Cooper’s essay on the *Pilgrimage*, and Strohm’s on the *Troy Book* (both of which hinge on the inherent tension between the physicality of the real world and the poetry’s tendency toward idealization and abstraction). Otherwise, virtually all of the poems discussed here can be found among the “minor” works of Henry Noble MacCracken’s edition. Many of the contributors make explicit or implicit claims for the stylistic or aesthetic quality of these poems (which are typified, as Smith notes, by precision and irony, as opposed to the abstraction and dilation of the long works). Almost all of the authors also find in the shorter works an intense, philosophical engagement with the physical world of everyday experience. That is in keeping with this book’s theme, but it may also be a way of saying that Lydgate’s shorter poems have more life in them.