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Book Review of: Corinne J. Saunders, A Companion to Medieval Poetry

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The title of this mammoth volume is cause for great delight and slight dismay. On the one hand, it is wonderful to see a collection of this size and ambition devoted to poetry, and to see poetry itself described by editor Corinne Saunders as “a rich and important subject, and one that needs introduction in a world where poetry is too little read” (1). Such formulations highlight the volume’s pedagogical and evangelizing goals, both of which are most welcome. On the other hand, and as reviewers in other journals have noted, its title is simply inaccurate. This is *not* “a companion to medieval poetry” but rather to “English medieval poetry,” or, still more precisely, to “medieval poetry in English,” since medieval England’s vibrant multilingualism is relatively rarely in view. (Chapters by Andy Orchard, on “Old English and Latin Poetic Traditions,” Elizabeth Archibald, on “Macaronic Poetry,” and R. F. Yeager, on “The Poetry of John Gower,” which treats the poet’s French and Latin works extensively, are the most notable and worthy exceptions to this rule.)

The fact that it is mistitled mars an otherwise fine volume. Saunders has assembled an exceptionally impressive cast of scholars, mostly British, to write its thirty-four chapters, which are divided into three parts: “Old English Poetry,” “Middle English Poetry,” and “Post-Chaucerian and Fifteenth-Century Poetry.” (The last of these titles unfortunately reinforces the durable belief that fifteenth-century literature is a category at once fundamentally in thrall to yet also apart from and implicitly inferior to earlier works, especially those of Chaucer.) These three parts are then divided into “Contexts” (mostly literary and material as distinct from social or political), “Genres and Modes” (for Old and Middle English but not, curiously, for the Fifteenth Century, even though that is where “Drama” and “Courtiers and Courtly Poetry” are covered), and “Poets and Poems” (for Middle English and the Fifteenth Century but not for Old English, although *Beowulf* does get its own chapter under the rubric of “Old English Epic Poetry”).

Collections such as these are valuable not just for their contents but also as snapshots of the field's sense of itself at a particular moment in time. In certain respects, this is a deeply conservative volume. The "Poets and Poems" of "Middle English Poetry," for example, turn out to be those of J. A. Burrow's seminal 1971 *Ricardian Poetry*: we have two chapters on the *Pearl*-poet (one on *Sir Gawain*, another on the manuscript's first three, religious poems), three on Chaucer (on love-visions, *Troilus*, and the *Tales*), and one each on Langland and Gower. I myself am delighted to see the *Pearl*-poet restored to critical view in a volume such as this after his near exclusion from David Wallace's *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge UP, 1999), but the reinscription of Burrow's Ricardian Four as the "Poets and Poems" of Middle English may well frustrate others. Devoting chapters to the Ricardian poets can also lead to curious holes in other chapters and in the volume itself. There is almost no discussion of dream-visions as a genre, for example, even though they are central to Middle English and especially Ricardian poetry (and Old English, if one includes *The Dream of the Rood*), doubtless because the most famous *specific* dream-visions are well treated in author-based chapters. Comparably, Rosalind Field's discussion of "Arthurian and Courtly Romance" makes no mention of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* since that poem receives its own able commentary later by Tony Davenport; this nevertheless represents an omission from her own subject.

Such objections are evidence that Saunders' volume will provoke useful debate on issues central to our field (here, the relation between literary genre and particular poems). Other aspects of her volume are even more straightforwardly exemplary, such as chapters in each of its three parts on the relation of language to poetry, by Richard Dance (Old English), Simon Horobin (Middle English), and A. S. G. Edwards (Fifteenth Century); Elizabeth Archibald's chapter on

macaronic poetry, noted above, also forms part of this welcome attention to what Saunders's introduction calls "the stuff of poetry" (1). In a brilliant move, each of these chapters on poetic language is immediately followed by one on manuscripts and readers (by Rohini Jayatilaka, Ralph Hanna, and Julia Boffey, respectively), thereby emphasizing that poetic "stuff" is material as well as linguistic.

In addition to the individual chapters noted above, I would single out for appreciative notice Nancy Mason Bradbury's on "Popular Romance," which helpfully breaks down both of those immensely complicated words before considering just why the *poetry* of (formerly) popular romances might still resonate today; and Lawrence Warner's on *Piers Plowman*, a poem that has made me feel stupid ever since I first struggled through it in graduate school but that I feel slightly more grounded in since reading Warner's lucid treatment. It is a tribute to these and the volume's many other strengths that the its cost—a frankly exorbitant \$199.95—seems, if not appropriate, at least grudgingly tolerable, for institutional purchasers at least. It will make a worthy addition to any university library.