

BOOK REVIEW

The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature: Volume 1: 800-1558. Edited by RITA COPELAND. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp.xii +758. Hardcover, \$235. ISBN 978-0-19-958723-0.

This volume is chronologically first, but fourth to appear, in a series of five volumes intended “to offer a comprehensive investigation of the numerous and diverse ways in which literary texts of the classical world have been responded to and refashioned by English writers.” (ii) Volume 1 covers the years 800 through 1558 CE, and consists of 28 chapters by a variety of established scholars and 7 detailed bibliographies concerning a variety of primary and secondary sources, ancient through humanist. The introduction which makes up the first chapter sets parameters for the collection, and defines key terms and concepts including ‘classical reception’, and ‘reception history’ which are the guiding forces throughout the book. Other assumptions and corollaries consider historical categorizations such as ‘classical’ and ‘antiquity’. Education, medieval Christianity and philosophy, and the emergence of humanism in the late 14th century are introduced as lenses that will appear in later chapters.

Chapters 2–5, by Rita Copeland, Marjorie Curry Woods, and Winston Black, relate to education, concentrating on the presence of classical authors in the medieval classroom and connections to the seven liberal arts. Chapters 6 and 7, by James Willoughby and Nicolette Zeeman, consider transmission and collections, while Chapters 8 by Rita Copeland discusses how classical authors are presented in medieval prologues (*accessus*). Chapters 9–12, by Jan M. Ziolkowski, Suzanne Conklin Akbari, Alfred Hiatt, and Winthrop Wetherbee, consider how individual authors (Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, Statius) were preserved and how their works influenced medieval thinkers and writers. Chapters 13–17, by Marilyn Desmond, Ian Cornelius, Charles F. Briggs, Cam Grey, and Ad Putter, examine genres of literature and philosophy in mostly historical terms (Troy, Boethius’ *De Consolatione*, wisdom literature, historiography-biography, late classical Biblical epics) and Chapters 18 (by Dallas G. Gentry II) and 20–22 (by Alastair Minnis, Andrew Galloway, and Robert R. Edwards) discuss specific medieval authors’ use of classical literature (John of Salisbury and Cicero, Geoffrey Chaucer and

classicism, John Gower and Ovid, John Lydgate and classical epic). Chapter 19, by Emily Steiner, presents the presence of classical topics and authors in the distinctly medieval English tradition of alliterative poetry. Chapters 23–24 by Daniel Wakelin and, and James P. Carley and Ágnes Juhász-Ormsby, review general early humanism, while 25–28, by David R. Carlson, Nicola Royan, Cathy Shrank, and James Simpson, discuss a variety of early humanist authors and their classical connections (John Skelton, Gavin Douglas, Sir Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard).

The opening chapter (“Introduction: England and the Classics from the Early Middle Ages to Early Humanism” by Rita Copeland) reflects both the attention to detail and the challenges of the collection overall. The overall goal of the volume is to cast “its nets both wide and deep to assess the pervasiveness of classical knowledge in the medieval period and to understand the abiding force of medieval classicisms among early humanists” (2). In this, the collection succeeds. The range of subjects and connections is indeed broad, and each individual essay is a focused, in-depth examination of its particular topic.

The biggest frustration is the lack of a clear organizing principle for the essays. The introduction uses the guiding question “How did the medieval publics engage seriously and often profoundly with antiquity in ways that exceed the record of translation and other visible forms of literary reception such as imitation?” (5) to set up the initial exploration of the complexities of the concepts to be addressed. Exploring the transmission of knowledge in a variety of forms is a worthwhile and admirable goal, but even as the collection overall accurately reflects and explores the complexities of the question, they also reflect its messy nature. For example, Chapters 16–20 cover historiography and biography from the sixth through twelfth centuries (Ch.16), late classical Biblical epic and Prudentius (Ch.17), John of Salisbury and rhetoric and dialectic in the twelfth century (Ch.18), alliterative English poetry in the late fourteenth century with inspiration and foundations in classical sources (Ch.19), and Chaucer (Ch.20). Chapters 17 and Chapter 20 are out of order in a chronological arrangement, 16 and 19 do not fit into an author-focused pattern, and 18 and 20 don’t fit a scheme organized around genre. The guiding question posed in the introduction and the opening conceptual review fit all of these essays, but the essays are each so focused on their individual area that the shared generality gets muddled.

This collection is more for advanced students and scholars of medieval English literature than for general reference. Latin is always translated, while older English

is translated in some cases, but not in others. For example, David Carlson's chapter on John Skelton (25) only provides occasional vocabulary glossing, while Emily Steiner's chapter on alliterative poetry (19) fully translates the Middle English. This difference may be due to Skelton being a later writer and thus using English more likely to be recognized, but without prior understanding of the conventions of early sixteenth century English, his poetry may still pose difficulties.

Assumptions of conceptual knowledge are similarly geared towards those with backgrounds in medieval English language and literature. For example, the term *auctor*, which has specific implications in medieval literature, would likely be familiar to a more advanced student or scholar, but the nuances would not be apparent to a general audience as the term goes undefined. On the other hand, *accessus* is defined in the introduction, and also more specifically explained in Chapter 8. These assumptions would not be a problem for someone with experience with medieval literature, but would be problematic for someone needing a general reference.

Overall this collection offers a valuable although at times disconnected investigation into the many ways that the mostly Latin classics passed through Anglo Saxon England into the reign of Henry the VIII. Although targeting medievalists and students of English literature, the discussions concerning transmission and reception are valuable to anyone interested in how English literature adapted and engaged with classical literature.

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