

Leeds Studies in English

New Series XLIX

© *Leeds Studies in English* 2018
School of English
University of Leeds
Leeds, England

ISSN 0075-8566

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2018

Edited by

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Leeds Studies in English

<www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

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University of Leeds

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Reviews

Copies of books for review should be sent to the Editor, *Leeds Studies in English*, School of English, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, United Kingdom.

David R. Carlson, *John Gower: Poetry and Propaganda in Fourteenth-Century England*. Cambridge: Brewer, 2012. viii + 245 pp. ISBN 9781843843153.

It seems common for the best late-fourteenth/early-fifteenth century English poets to question the order of things. Accordingly, those who appear to have ‘collaborated’ with the English monarchy, most important among them John Gower, are sometimes given a back seat. Gower wrote a number of short texts in Middle English, Anglo-Norman, and Latin, as well as the monumental poem *Confessio amantis*, which comments on various aspects of culture, society, and contemporary events. David Carlson’s monograph, the subject of the present review, goes some way towards restoring Gower’s reputation and position within the medieval canon.

The first five chapters provide the necessary context of the state-writer relationship in fourteenth-century England. Carlson first compares short poems on the battle of Bannockburn (1314) by William Baston and Laurence Minot. He raises the difficulties in determining whether a poet’s work was patronised, given that it was in their best interest to loudly declare their (potential or actual) patrons, while it was in poor taste to be seen commissioning a poem about one’s own actions (pp. 5–25). Carlson argues that ‘official’ newsletters and correspondence were considered as authoritative sources that were then used by other writers, especially chroniclers, such as Robert of Avesbury and Henry Knighton (pp. 26–43).¹ Carlson then shows how poems produced in early- to mid-fourteenth century England (such as those by Minot and the Calais Anonymous) had intentions that are similar to those of the previously discussed state-supporting letters, but took on a different form (pp. 44–67). He makes a very interesting case study of contemporary English sources on the battle of Nájera in Spain (1367), such as *Gloria cunctorum*, Edward of Woodstock’s letter to his wife Joan of Kent, and Walter Peterborough’s *Victoria belli in Hispania*, to illustrate the varied interaction between newsletters and panegyric verse (pp. 68–92). Carlson finishes this section with another case study, this time on a single text, Richard Maidstone’s *Concordia* (1392), and examines how it employs both official and unofficial sources (pp. 93–109).

Only in the final four chapters of his book does Carlson directly address Gower, his ostensible main subject. He first provides background context for Gower by covering texts written during and after Richard II’s deposition and how, even in the absence of any evidence of their direct commissioning, these writings legitimise Henry IV’s actions (pp. 110–52). Then, in his longest chapter, Carlson argues that Gower’s *Chronica tripertita* is a state sponsored text. This argument is primarily based on his analysis of the many instances in which Gower’s text seems to rely on the official *Record and Process* (pp. 153–96). Carlson clearly illustrates this relationship through a large table that displays corresponding passages (pp. 158–61). He then shows how Gower’s use of state texts was not thoughtless, but rather meant to promote the state and Henry IV’s rule (pp. 197–226). He suggests that Gower was commissioned by the state, although he earlier acknowledges that this cannot be known

¹ It should be noted that, in addition to those cited by Carlson, such documents are interpolated into several other mid-fourteenth century chronicles of England. See most notably Adam Murimuth, ‘Continuatio chronicarum’, in *Adae Murimuth; Robertus de Avesbury*, ed. by Edward Maunde Thompson, Rolls Series, 93 (London: Eyre, 1889), pp. 3–276; the continuation of the *Bridlington Chronicle*, in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II*, ed. by William Stubbs, Rolls Series, 76, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1882–83), II, 93–151; John of Tynemouth’s *Historia aurea*, unedited and surviving most fully in London, Lambeth Palace Library, MSS 10–12; and the 1327–47 continuation of the *Long Anglo-Norman Prose Brut*, unedited and surviving only in London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius A VI, fols 184^r–199^r.

with any certainty. This final chapter clears up some lingering issues, most importantly by showing how Gower was not the mindless scribe of the crown, as some claim, through careful consideration of the several instances in which Gower criticises the state. On the other hand, Carlson suggests that some of Gower's other writings might be considered 'official verse panegyric', 'conceived and written' to praise Henry IV (p. 209). He ends his book with a short but fascinating consideration of Gower's opportunism through an examination of how he took verse that he had first written for Richard II and adapted it so that it was instead for his usurper, Henry IV (pp. 212–13).

Interesting and compelling as they are, it is sometimes difficult to accept some of the arguments and observations made in the book. As is not uncommon with non-specialists, Carlson demonstrates only passing familiarity with the many complicated issues of medieval war, such as when he derides it for (supposedly) being conducted solely for financial gain (pp. 28–31).² He unfairly dismisses Edward III's claim to the throne of France, along with the many other difficult issues that are brought up in many English texts throughout the Hundred Years War, as insincere and merely propaganda (pp. 44–47).³ He relies on existing translations whenever possible, creating a number of problems in interpretation, such as, when quoting Baston, he relies on Morgan's popular and overly stylistic translation instead of Latham's scholarly translation (p. 6 n. 1).⁴

Carlson provides a useful examination of a complicated subject in an accessible and stimulating format. His arguments are clear, concise, and follow a logical direction. It is made particularly interesting and fresh through his engagement with many lesser-known texts. It is especially helpful to see how the English state continued to rely on a variety of writers for support throughout the fourteenth century, despite the changing social and political conditions. I was very happy that Carlson examined texts written in all three languages of late medieval England, side by side, rather than just Middle English, which is too often studied in isolation. Carlson's arguments and observations are always thorough and rewarding, and they will surely encourage further study of Gower's fascinating writings, as well as the other political poems of medieval England, that are too often overlooked.

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² See recent works on chivalry, and the importance of reputation and fighting for one's lord, most recently Richard Kaeuper, *Medieval Chivalry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

³ Craig Taylor, 'Edward III and the Plantagenet Claim to the French Throne', in *The Age of Edward III*, ed. by James S. Bothwell (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2001), pp. 155–69.

⁴ Robert Baston, *Metrum de praelio apud Bannockburn*, trans. by Edwin Morgan (Edinburgh: Scottish Poetry Library, 2004); Baston, 'De striuelinensi obsidione', trans. by Ronald E. Latham, in Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon*, ed. by Donald E. R. Watt and others, 9 vols (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987–98), vi, 366–75, 458–60.