

This is the author-created version of the following work:

**Taylor, Cheryl (2020) *Author, Scribe, and Book in Late Medieval English Literature* by Rory G. Critten (review). *Parergon*, 37 (1) pp. 236-237.**

Access to this file is available from:

<https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/64057/>

Authors grant to Parergon an irrevocable, fee-free licence to publish their articles in printed form and in other media (including electronic) that are the subject of sub-licensing agreements between Parergon and third parties. Any royalties or revenues received under such sub-licensing agreements will be collected and retained by the publisher of Parergon, the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (Incorporated).

Please refer to the original source for the final version of this work:

<https://doi.org/10.1353/pgn.2020.0014>

**Critten, Rory G., *Author, Scribe, and Book in Late Medieval English Literature*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2018; hardback; pp. 238; 3 b/w illustrations; R.R.P. £60.00; ISBN 9781843845058.**

The writers whose works are the subject of this book, Thomas Hoccleve, Margery Kempe, John Audelay and Charles d'Orléans, were diverse in achievement, class, occupation, location, genre, subject matter, and gender. What they shared was an era—the first half of the fifteenth century—and the English language, in which each composed one or more of their works. *Author, Scribe and Book* brings these authors together on the basis of one further attribute that they shared—self-publication. Each participated in the physical making of their books, either by transcription—Hoccleve—, by dictation—Margery—, by compilation—Audelay—, or by supervision—Charles.

Given the distinctiveness of the chosen authors' books and book-making methods, an important component of Rory G. Critten's achievement has been to unify his analyses under a single claim, namely that 'Hoccleve, Kempe, Audelay and Charles used the occasion afforded by the publication of their works to attempt a wholesale redefinition of their public identities' (p. 25). Many subsidiary analyses and ideas attend the explication of this statement in respect of each author.

Hoccleve's works chosen to elaborate his self-publishing pose are the short dedicatory poems that he addressed to Edward of York and John of Lancaster, and, centrally, the *Series*, which he wrote following a mental breakdown, primarily to advance readmission to his circle of London and Westminster clerical friends. In parallel, the public shaming that Margery received after returning to London from pilgrimage in 1434 motivated her and her scribes to expedite the 'collaborative production of their biography' (p. 78). In Margery's *Book* Critten distinguishes contradictory portrayals of the author as a unique individual and model for contemplation authorized by Mary Magdalen, whose story likewise displays 'discontinuities and discordances' (p. 78). Blind Audelay's dubious claim to be the copyist as well as the compiler, translator and author of *Poems and Carols* was inspired by penitence and by a comparable wish to mend his own and his patron's ruined reputations. Audelay makes frequent allusions to his infirmity as a source of moral instruction in what are otherwise highly conventional works. Held prisoner after Agincourt first in Windsor and later in Pontefract Castle, in the months before his release in 1440 the duke of Orléans oversaw the making of two collections of his poetry: an English *Book of Love* (London, British Library, MS Harley 682) and a parallel anthology in French (Paris, BnF, MS fr. 25458). Points of difference in content and self-presentation between the two collections reveal that Charles intended his English book to diffuse distrust among his English captors of what they judged to be as his *cauteleux*, or wily, nature (pp. 148–49).

The quality of scholarship in *Author, Scribe and Book* is outstanding, but some readers may want to resist a few of the findings. The argument that, despite its dedication to Lady Joan Beaufort, Hoccleve's *Series* is ultimately anti-feminist (p. 58) is disappointing but convincing, and one wonders how true this is of Hoccleve's *corpus* as a whole. Feminists may also want to test Derek Pearsall's quoted view that the initial audience targeted in *The Canterbury Tales* was likewise all-male (pp. 62–63). Surviving Middle English writings by women are lamentably few. It therefore seems unfortunate that the reader is urged to think of Margery's *Book* as a collaborative production to which her scribes made a notable, and even an equal, contribution.

In general *Author, Scribe and Book* lives up to the promises of its generalized title. As a study of 'late medieval English literature' that incorporates excursions into biography and palaeography and analyses of Latin and French texts, it demonstrates the disconnectedness of fifteenth-century writing, an aspect that literary histories tend to downplay. Despite what must have been intense centrifugal pressures, Critten holds his dense and complex discussion together. He succeeds in

guiding the reader through ideas which, while typically true of one or more of his authors, are usually not true of all. More importantly—and this is where the book’s chief value lies—he provides new insights into subjects and texts that have already been extensively written about by other specialists in the field. There is, moreover, an admirable honesty about this book, which habitually outlines previous arguments by others and delineates precisely where the author’s own contributions begin and end. An extensive bibliography, index, and footnotes further consolidate the argument and suggest avenues for future research.

CHERYL TAYLOR, *James Cook University*