

Ralph Hanna 2005: *London Literature, 1300–1380*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, no. 57. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. xxi+359pp. ISBN 0-521-84835-0

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Literary history has traditionally endeavoured to offer an orderly view of literary production through the times by means of a master narrative whose organizing chapters tend to correlate with historical events deemed to have significant effects on literature. This kind of approach to literary writing in its historical dimension usually focuses on one single language, thus making for a homogeneous and antiseptic narrative in which the diachronic evolution of the given language and its literature are shown to follow parallel paths. These premises informed the practice of literary history during the best part of the last century and before, but the emergence of postmodern literary studies has made apparent that those totalizing accounts actually obscure more complex and problematic realities, and that literary manifestations are better understood within their immediate cultural environment. While it is relatively easy to show the inadequacy of former critical positions to explain the literary activity of past times, it is certainly difficult for literary historians to entirely satisfy the holistic demands of current criticism. A case in point is the on-going *New Cambridge History of English Literature*, which tackles the polyvocal nature of literature and in its volume devoted to the medieval period contains the cultural information necessary for a better understanding of the written production of an era, i.e. 1066–1547, and of a specific geographical area, i.e. the British Isles (cf. Wallace 1999). The object of study has now expanded and is no longer limited to texts composed in English but comprises the written production in Anglo-Norman, Latin and Welsh, too. Moreover, in the volume edited by Wallace texts are not discussed *per se*, but instead scholars consider external agents as well, such as scribes, owners, readers and institutional authorities, who have an effect on the processes of textual transmission and reception. The expansion of the object of study means that all attempts to present a coherent straight-line narrative are vain, and that works of literary history as the one edited by Wallace can present only an imperfect and general picture. Hanna himself categorically expresses this same opinion in a recent article: “In this period, English literature (better, ‘literature in England’, since it might be written in any of three languages) is comprised of a series of local text communities, each with its distinct parameters. As a result, there may be no such thing as a ‘literary history of late medieval England’” (2004: 174).

As the very title of the book under examination indicates, *London Literature, 1300–1380* aims to discuss one of those coherent fragments that compose the disjointed literary history in its postmodern expression. In order for us to better appreciate his effort to recapture the past lived experience of literature in any given locality, Hanna opens his book with a prefatory section enticingly titled ‘In Thrall’, which evokes the author’s experience of growing up in his hometown, Thrall, Tex., where his childhood was marked by the sounds and smells of cotton ginning. The evanescent sensations he relates are probably the ones that best encapsulate the distinctiveness of the author’s childhood locale, and this is why he uses this biographical analogy to explain that his

book “will be primarily concerned with what gets repressed, as literary history, in accounts ... of a *longue duree*” (xvi). In the book Hanna also returns to a specific past time and space, to a textual community defined with clear geographical and chronological boundaries, namely fourteenth-century London, a locality whose productive possibilities he intends to restore, albeit fragmentarily. For this exercise in literary immersion into the past Hanna has recourse to codicology *lato sensu*, that is to say, to a discipline concerned with manuscripts not simply as textual carriers but also as cultural artefacts (cf. Grujts 1972, McKenzie 1986). As the author states, “my argument will return to the manuscripts, the local instantiations of textual culture, forgotten behind the printed editions of canonical authors like Chaucer” (xvii). With his recognized palaeographical expertise, Hanna succeeds in transforming codicological details into hard evidence, always so elusive in medieval literary studies. This is certainly one of the virtues of the present monograph, enabling Hanna to build a solid and dependable argument while making visible the limitations and imprecision of relying exclusively on critical editions of medieval texts.

The introduction proper is given in ‘English Vernacular Culture in London before 1380: the Evidence’, a lengthy and meaty chapter that lays the groundwork for the ensuing discussion. Hanna observes that vernacular book-trade during this period has generally been described as provincial by modern manuscript scholars, who recognize as the main centres of literary activity the ancient diocese of Worcester, some Yorkshire locales, and to a lesser degree textual communities in Norfolk and Lincolnshire. Was then London a literary wasteland? It is true that, as Hanna points out, the metropolis suffered the disadvantage of finding outside its walls the spaces of high cultural activity, namely the universities and religious foundations. Nonetheless, we should suppose that some sort of literary activity, however limited, must have existed in London for it to become undoubtedly the country’s centre of manuscript production from the early fifteenth century onward. It is exactly this attenuated literary life that Hanna traces back and vindicates. In view that “London, in the earlier fourteenth century, is notable chiefly as an absence from the continuum constructed by scholars as ‘The History of English Literature’” (3),¹ Hanna wants to draw scholarly attention to London *Edwardian literature*. With the choice of this descriptive label Hanna juxtaposes this literature to that of the Ricardian age postulated by John Burrow (1971) in a seminal monograph that has attracted a great deal of critical interest in the late-fourteenth century. While the reigns of the three Edwards elapsed from 1272 until 1377, Hanna focuses mainly on the period ca. 1310–80, thus showing that these chronological boundaries are not immovable. This attitude allows him to contentiously describe William Langland as “the city’s most important Edwardian author” (4), despite the fact that his production lasted until ca. 1395 and that he has been usually recognized as one of the great figures of the Ricardian period.

In order to substantiate his claim for the existence of a London written culture during the Edwardian period, Hanna has had to define a textual corpus with direct metropolitan associations. With the help of the dialectological research conducted by McIntosh, *et al.* (1986), Hanna has selected manuscripts located in the London area that

¹ Cf. Lindenbaum (1999), who discusses London literary culture only from 1375 onward.

were written in *Type II London* (Samuels 1963).² This linguistic criterion is of chronological significance, since around 1380 changes occur to the London dialect, now designated *Type III London*. By combining palaeographic criteria with dialectological ones, Hanna has identified the ten codices localized in the historical geography of Edwardian London, including the famous Auchinleck manuscript (see Pearsall and Cunningham 1979). These manuscripts contain what we can now consider to represent the London contemporary literary canon, whose fundamental text seems to have been *The Mirror*, a Middle English prose translation of Robert of Gretham's Anglo-Norman poetic sermon-cycle known as *Mirur*. Present in four out of the ten London codices, this text's centrality contrasts with the fact that it has not yet been fully edited, since the recent edition by Duncan and Connolly (2003) is only partial, thus confirming Hanna's claim that the metropolitan literary culture of this period has been in general neglected by modern scholars. The readings of fourteenth-century Londoners would include, on the one hand, religious texts such as the aforementioned *Mirror*, *Ancrene Riwe*, and excerpts from *The South English Legendary*, among others, while on the other hand, the corpus of romance texts collected in the Auchinleck manuscript and in Bodleian Library MS Laud misc. 622, as for instance *Beves of Hamtoun*, *Guy of Warwick*, and *Lybeaus Desconus*. Moreover, using testamentary records and inventories of possessions, the author has expanded the selection of texts that must have been available to London readers (11–15). After making some remarks about the transmission of texts in fourteenth-century London, the introductory chapter closes by referring to “a largely unrecorded London cultural surround with some claim to literary attention” (32), including activities such as bill-posting, ceremonials associated with the ritual year like Mayings, Christmas mumblings, the Corpus Christi processions, and other civic displays with literary resonances, like tournaments and the guilds' public activities.

Having presented with didactic clarity and descriptive precision the method used for establishing the textual corpus, Hanna proceeds to explain some historical and literary conditions that can improve our understanding of Edwardian London's written culture. Chapter two, titled “The “Old” Law”, explores the developments of London book-production occurred in the last decades of the thirteenth century that had a direct effect on contemporary literary culture and prepared the ground for the greater sophistication achieved in fourteenth-century manuscript productions. The compilations of statutes known as *Statuta Anglia* assemble the main body of legal norms promulgated in the thirteenth century from Magna Carta in 1215 until the Statute of Westminster of 1285 (46). Hanna suggests that the origin of anglicana as the literary script par excellence of the fourteenth century is to be found in the London legal book culture of the previous century, together with the genealogy of the large size of literary books, their page format and *mise-en-page*, as in the case of the Auchinleck manuscript. The author takes this opportunity to provide new arguments to explain the process of compilation of this last fundamental codex. First he argues that “the [manuscript] booklets ... are probably not, as in fifteenth-century work, simultaneous in origin, a production economy, but largely the sequential efforts of a single individual” (76); with this production system in mind, Hanna considers the possibility that “at various stages of production, portions of the book may have been passed from

² Note, however, that Hanna is also critical of these scholars' methodology; cf. pp. 27–32.

scribe 1 ... to the client for his or her use" (77). After alluding to other manuscripts that present analogous production behaviours such as Huntington Library HM 25782 or Corpus Christi College MS 70, the book discusses the miniatures illustrating the Auchinleck manuscript and links them with the team of artists that between ca. 1310–1330 decorated twenty-five manuscripts of London origin now extant. Although Hanna comments about the Auchinleck limner that his "efforts have been generally ignored and unduly trashed" (79), this is no longer the case: in a recent monograph Maidie Hilmo (2004: 112–25) provides a complete discussion of the five miniatures still remaining.

Under the heading 'Reading Romance in London', the book focuses on the romance texts that appear in Auchinleck and Laud misc. 622. As other scholars have done recently (e.g. McDonald 2004), Hanna voices the view that Middle English romances are texts deserving of fully sophisticated consideration. Then the author sets an example by offering fresh and elaborate readings of *Guy of Warwick* and *Beves of Hamtoun*, the two verse romances with the most long-lived textual history. Some of the goals of his discussion are to prove that "denigrating the narrative sophistication of Middle English romance is a view far from well-taken" (109) and that *Beves* "can be dismissed as 'popular' only through the crudest of readings" (133). While these objectives are amply achieved, Hanna could have been more enterprising and attempt a contextualized commentary of these texts, raising issues of greater historical import: for example, in what ways were romances relevant to London readers?³

The following chapter considers Pepys MS 2498 in its codicological, textual, literary and social aspects. Despite the fact that this manuscript "represents the most extensive project of English vernacular book-production undertaken before the close of the fourteenth century" (153), it has received little critical interest, thus making Hanna's discussion necessary. He claims that Pepys 2498 had an original centrality comparable to, though discrepant with, that of Auchinleck: while the latter stands out for its secular contents and aristocratic opulence, the former is sober in its presentation and concerned with religious topics. A distinguishing feature of the Pepys manuscript is that it "makes available to English readers some of the literary riches of past centuries, works composed in England but not in English" (157); in particular, it includes texts derived from the Latin biblical tradition that from the mid-twelfth century were rendered into Anglo-Norman and appear translated into English in Pepys. In view of the texts' presentation and of the nature of the translation, in particular of the Middle English prose Apocalypse, the *Mirror* and *Ancrene Riwe*, Hanna associates this manuscript with an audience composed by "pious literates with devotional interests, actively committed to imposing high standards of devotion and conduct on their community" (202).

The last two chapters are concerned with the final part of the Edwardian period. In 'Anglo-Norman's Imagined End' Hanna focuses on Sir John Chandos's Herald, author of *La Vie du Prince Noir* (ca. 1385), which exalts the military career of Edward, the Black Prince. Hanna's decision to choose an author who "is not precisely an English figure at all" (222) and whose main work was produced outside the chronological limits of the study is, however, questionable, especially when there is a text and an author better

³ For instance, Robert Rouse has recently explored how *Beves* "manifests an anxiety concerning centralised power in the form of both the king and of London" (2005: 88).

suiting to the book's scope. I am referring to *Mirrou de l'Omme*, the Anglo-Norman poem finished between 1376 and 1378 in the London borough of Southwark by the English poet John Gower, a contemporary and friend of Chaucer, traditionally associated with the Ricardian period (see Echard 2004). By contrast, chapter six centres on William Langland – usually labelled a Ricardian poet (cf. 247) – in particular on the B Version of *Piers Plowman*, “the culmination of Edwardian literature in the City” (243). Since this is a controversial attribution, Hanna provides arguments to substantiate it and concludes convincingly by saying that while “summer 1377 might be only a *terminus a quo*, it is the point at which the B Version achieved imaginative stasis” (250). In other words, it is a contemporaneous poem that thematically looks back in time, past “þe pestilence tyme” (Pro. 84), and that should be considered in the context of that previous literary tradition. This chronological assumption together with the poem's southerly origin means that the comparison of Langland's text with other alliterative Ricardian poems – e.g. the *Gawain*-group, *Morte Arthure*, *The Wars of Alexander* – is misguided; instead, for a more productive comparative analysis one should look for other alliterative texts such as *Winner and Waster*, and that is exactly what Hanna does to present a London reading of Langland's text.

Written by a scholar who has distinguished himself mainly for his contributions to Middle English book history, *London Literature, 1300–1380* is a ground-breaking monograph, not only for having delineated the main components of Edwardian London literature, but also and more importantly, for having developed a methodology that can easily be applied to the study of textual communities in other locales and periods. Palaeographical data, always gathered with painstaking work but usually overlooked by the literary critic, takes centre-stage and will make the book particularly attractive and comforting to manuscript scholars. These will appreciate seeing their expertise put at the service of literary history and criticism, and will revel in some virtuoso moments, as in the description of the hand that copied *La Vie du Prince Noir* in Oxford, Worcester College MS 1 (225–26), which could have well been supplemented with an illustrative plate. *London Literature, 1300–1380* has gone through a long period of gestation (the author places its embryo in 1981), but I am convinced that its influence will last much longer.

I would like to end this review with two final observations. While this thoroughly researched study has been successful in supporting its arguments with hard evidence, this academic rigour has required the deployment of a wealth of information that, however, has not always been well-managed. Probably due to editorial principles imposed by the printing house, Hanna has integrated in the body of the text digressive and lengthy discussions that detract from the force of the argument. In a monograph addressed mainly to literary scholars, the author could have used more extended chapter endnotes to treat less central issues (e.g. in chapter two the discussion of legal history and of The Great Cause could have thus been reduced in the body of the text). Additionally, Hanna's referencing strategy seems to me inadequate and unreliable. He warns us at the beginning, “Readers will probably recognise a number of studies not here cited, although ostensibly relevant. Quite simply, I attempt to maintain bonhomie by not feeling compelled to cite, much less offer a critique of, works I have found generally unhelpful” (xviii). I find it hard to believe that, for example, the following works are not cited due to their general unhelpfulness: on p. 143 n. 5, Crane 1986; on p.

240 n. 11, Collins 2000. The documentation of references in academic works has a well-established tradition, and any scholar would be well advised to follow it.

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