

14.08. 06, Mooney and Stubbs, eds., Scribes and the City

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Mooney, Linne R. and Estelle Stubbs *Woodbridge York Medieval Press* 2013 Pp. 168 \$60.00 (hardback) 9781903153406 (hardback)
review Transformed encoding to P5 TEI.

Study of medieval English literature has experienced a Copernican revolution since Linne Mooney gave her dramatic paper at Glasgow identifying Adam Pinkhurst as Chaucer's Scribe. The applause, as I recall, went on for quite a while and can still, justly, be heard today. Here Mooney and Estelle Stubbs unify much of the recent work in scribal identification and professional biography, collecting the central information from Mooney's landmark *Speculum* article, from her essay with Horobin in *SAC*, and from so many other related essays composed by the book's two authors and by the full field of textual critics that have either prepared the land for this textual revolution or recently labored upon it. It is wonderful to have the entire movement of Guildhall study in one convenient bibliography and in one volume, arranged by scribe, and accompanied by images of the literary and governmental documents upon which the identifications have been made, revealing who copied some of the most prominent literary documents in the history of medieval English literature.

After a list of illustrations and a handy map of relevant sites in London, the introduction offers a clear overview of the scholarly work of identifying the scribes here studied. An error scholars had made, we learn from a quotation from Andrew Prescott, was neglecting 90% of the handwritten records of medieval England because they were not literary manuscripts. Paying attention now to "the hands of government documents produced in London at this period," allows the authors to offer nothing less than a "new vision for the copying and dissemination of Middle English Literature in the Age of Chaucer and continuing into the first few decades of the fifteenth century" (1). The scribes who copied many extant manuscripts of Chaucer, Langland, Gower, and other canonical authors were actually "clerk attorneys of the [London] Guildhall, working for the mayor, alderman, and sheriffs of the City of London and acting as attorneys in their courts, and later in their careers holding the most important clerical positions in the city" (2). Just as Chaucer and Hoccleve had administrative positions and wrote poetry "around [their] day job[s]," so too these clerk attorneys "must have copied manuscripts of Middle English Literature after hours or between jobs" (2). The book sets out to profile the hands, work, careers, and productions of the various identified scribes and to explore as well "how the clerks positioned themselves in the politics of late fourteenth- and early fifteenth- century London" (2). The rest of the introduction surveys the individual chapters to follow, which, starting with chapter two, profile each man.

Before that chapter 1, however, goes into greater detail about the nature of the position and work of these men, explaining the structure of London administration, and the "offices of the civil servants who ran its day to day government" (7). Simply put, the London Guildhall "employed a number of clerks to record and enact the business of the mayor and the aldermen and their courts" (7). Controller, chamberlain, common clerk, clerk of the chamber, coroner, waterbailiff: medieval administration sounds strangely like that of any major city where all sorts of bureaucrats are in charge of proceedings, records, the production and maintenance of documents of one kind or another. Chaucer was "controller of the wool custom," and his friend, mentioned in the *Troilus*, Ralph Strode, was "serjeant-at-law," the "spokesman and prosecutor for the freeman of London and their orphans in the city courts" (9). The picture that emerges in this chapter, especially from the involvement of Chaucer's jobs, is of groups of learned, clerkly, and bookish men, at work in civic and royal service, building associations and professional interconnections that must have facilitated the business of copying literary manuscripts.

The authors then discuss the *Liber Albus*, a compilation of booklets on various aspects of city governance, which bears the hands of three of the volumes scribes, including John Marchaunt, previously well known as Doyle's and Parkes' Scribe D. The *Liber Albus* is thus a treasury of models for identification of hands long witnessed in literary manuscripts. So too are the so-called Letter Books, which compile the "decisions of the court of common council and court of aldermen relating to the government of the City of London" (15), used here to identify Osborn and Pinkhurst, while also witnessing Marchaunt and Carpenter. The authors were also able to use the "contents of these entries...to match the names of these clerks with the duties and responsibilities of the offices" (16). "Remarkable as it seems," say our authors, "these busy clerks found time to prepare copies of vernacular literary writings" (16).

The following chapters are: chapter 3: Richard Osborn, Chamber Clerk 1400-1437; chapter 4, John Marchaunt, Chamber Clerk 1380-1399, Common Clerk 1399-1417; chapter 5: Adam Pinkhurst, Scrivener and Clerk of the Guildhall, c. 1378-1410; chapter 6: John Carpenter, Common Clerk 1417-1438; chapter 7: Other Scribes Associated with the Guildhall or its Clerks; chapter 8: Conclusions, and chapter 9: Epilogue.

I will use the Osborn chapter as representative of the methods of argument employed in the other profiles. The authors recount the existing scholarship on the scribe, summarizing and synthesizing what was known, and listing in exact detail the work in various manuscripts that is attributed to his hand, in Osborn's case based on the foundational work of Doyle and Hanna. The authors then explain the bases of their identifications, which "depend upon recognition of his hand in the London documents as being the same as the hand in the literary manuscripts" (19). Then they present the images from Hm114 and discuss the distinctive features of, in this case, the rather "unpolished appearance" of Osborn's hand, a style that is "at variance with what we would expect from a professional scribe like Scribe D or Adam Pinkhurst" (21). Then comes detailed study of the letter forms, in this case using images of the top of two folios, one from *Piers* and the other from *The Three Kings of Cologne* (fig. 2.1-2.2), to explore the distinctive features of e, g, h, w, d, s, and g, noting that in Osborn's case "[n]ot only the aspect but the letter-forms vary from one piece of writing to another," demanding that "we

need to look harder for what can be taken as evidence of his hand" (21). They then consider the images from two other literary manuscripts attributed to him (figs. 2.3-2.4: The Troilus and the Prose Brut).

Then comes a look at the documents of the London Guildhall that reveal the same hand and thus the professional world of the man behind the work. In Osborn's case it is Letter Book I (from the reigns of Henry IV and V), an excerpt that "records the decree of the major and aldermen prohibiting people from walking in the streets in disguise even if they are mummers during the Christmas season, but urging people to be merry in their own houses" (23). The rest of the chapter explores Osborn's distinct practices in his literary work, which shows a "compiling tendency" (30), as well known from the Piers text in Ht (Hm 114), which is a combined ABC version. The authors then explore the dating of his work, including a fascinating look at the use of paper stocks. Then they explore the possible relations of his exemplars to the complex textual traditions of Chaucer's *Troilus*, pointing to the difficulty of reconciling Osborn's apparently poor exemplars to his marked tendency for completeness and accuracy and to the Guildhall's purported access to the "best authorial exemplars" (37). Pondering this puzzle as it relates to the transmission history of Chaucer's poem, they encourage Chaucer's editors to "revisit this issue" (37). In all chapters, the attention to detail and the clarity of the descriptions allows the reader to follow the processes of identification and to consider how the scribe's products may be tools for exploring any number of textual and cultural histories.

The conclusion explores the "how and why" of it all, explaining how busy men with day jobs would work at nights or during breaks in legal proceedings. The authors helpfully explain how long various tasks of copying would take: "working full time, one of our scribes would complete an eighty-folio manuscript of Piers Plowman in twenty days...he could finish a hundred-folio manuscript of Hoccleve's Regiment in twenty five days...the 120-folio *Troilus* would take him thirty days" (133). Nothing puts work in perspective like time.

They then explain four potential reasons for this literary copying: Special Commission, Financial, Personal Acquaintance, and Political Considerations. Evidence suggests that scribes tended to take on such work "in the earlier part of their careers" when they needed to make money (a paradigm no doubt familiar to modern academics). The section on personal relations depicts a groups of clerks and poets who knew each other, sometimes supported each other professionally (or opposed each other politically as when Usk, clerk of the Goldsmiths' Company, accuses Marchaunt of confederacy with Northampton), and basically engaged one another in what we would call the same academic and political circles. But all these men may have been involved as well in another kind of cultural politics, in the "wider movement toward the adoption of English as the language of government and commerce" (137).

The authors note that London documents from the 1370s and '80s, "the earliest documents written in English" in the language's governmental resurgence, were associated, one way or another, "with the faction of London politics led by John of Northampton," including the appeal of the Mercers' company (that Pinkhurst wrote) against former mayor and Northampton opponent Nicholas Bembre. Further, King Henry IV, who supported Chaucer and Gower "was the first English monarch since the Conquest to deliver his coronation oath in English" (137). The associations of men, money, language, and power come fast and furious here, and the authors provide some bibliography on these late-14th century "conflicts" to use Marion Turner's word (cf. 137, n. 25). What emerges is a community of learned clerks whose documents in English were political tools and even weapons in these various conflicts in late-fourteenth century England. We have long known that the Age of Chaucer was a turbulent one at all levels of government and law, but now we begin to see how these Guildhall clerks--the previously unknown scribes of literary manuscripts--played a part in these tensions and intrigues with their production of documents in English. Immediately any reader involved in textual work, with these scribes or with others, will recognize that our current surge in the study of scribal performances is increasingly revealing that scribes could be ambitious men of letters themselves, displaying an interest in literary production--for various and by no means completely understood reasons. On this point, to be read in parallel with the Osborn chapter is Patricia Bart's immediately important essay about the artful literary and professional practices of the Scribe of Ht, identified in this volume as Osborn. [1]

My only critique is that the images in *Scribes and the City* are inconsistent in quality and are reproduced without indication of scale or size but rather with varying notations such as "reduced," "enlarged," "extract," "extract enlarged," "extract reduced," "slightly reduced" or "reduced slightly." This creates a general chaos about the actual size of the pages and thus makes direct comparison difficult. The Bodleian, the Kew National Archives, and the London Metropolitan Archives did not provide adequate images consistently, while other libraries, such as the Huntington, have provided by contrast excellent photography. The individual images of letter forms are equally, if not more, erratic and inconsistent in quality, in some cases so expanded that pixilation imperils usefulness. [2] Obviously, the sharper the image the more pleasing and useful it is.

The volume is not just designed, I believe, to consolidate the state of the field but also to provide exemplars that one can employ in further identification of unknown hands. In this case the book could rank with Malcolm Parkes's volume on *English Cursive Book Hands* (1969) as a critical tool that advances study. The authors also maintain at York an "online catalogue" (<http://www.medievalscribes.com/>) with 441 manuscript images and 17,191 images of letter forms. No doubt as better images become available and as technology for viewing and juxtaposing them evolves, this digital archive will become an ever more dynamic resource. Accidents of technology and production can be overcome and do evolve.

In the epilogue, Mooney and Stubbs humbly claim that they offer this book as a "first step toward recognizing the importance of the Guildhall secretariat in the dissemination of Middle English Literature" (141). They are right because so much more work can be done, not only with the identification of hands but in studying the literary texts these scribes produced. Readers, like this reviewer, will wonder what in the future can be learned about the motivations and thoughts of these scribes. As clerks (three of the four scribes here studied copied Piers), what did they think of Piers Plowman's constant critique of clergy and the opposition between the learned and the lewd? Serving mayors and kings, what did they think of what Piers has to say about mayors and kings? What a fascinating, socially engaged life these clerks could lead, writing about orphans during the day and copying a poem about bastards by night.

As they reveal the working world of each scribe, stroke by stroke, Mooney and Stubbs write clear, generous, and humane prose, with no

burden but to present what they, and what the community of related scholars, have worked so hard to achieve. Their humility should not stop us from celebrating the revolutionary changes in understanding that this book consolidates and expresses. The specifics of scribal performance, already seen as evidence of early reception, become even more critical and illustrative when we know the name, work, and role of the scribe in English political history. Literary study of the Age of Chaucer is transformed by this work, which will continue to inform our study of literary manuscripts, which, now linked to the men and documents around them, are poised to tell us ever more and more.

Notes:

1. The identification of Osborn coincided with the near simultaneous publication of a detailed profile of his scribal practice by Bart, the editor of HM114 for the Piers Plowman Electronic Archive: see Patricia R. Bart, "Intellect, Influence, and Evidence: The Elusive Allure of the Ht Scribe," in *Yee? Baw for Bokes : Essays on Medieval Manuscripts and Poetics in Honor of Hoyt N. Duggan*, eds. Michael Calabrese and Stephen Shepherd (Los Angeles: Loyola Marymount Press, 2013). The edition of the MS itself is in progress.
2. I am grateful to my colleague Stephen Shepherd, a noted Middle English editor with expertise in photography and photographic reproduction for consulting with me on the matter of the book's images.

Professor Mooney and Dr Stubbs have now also discovered Pinkhurst's hand in documents of the City, including its Letter Books (COL/CS/01) recording the decisions of Mayor and Aldermen, demonstrating that he, too, worked in some capacity for the City as well as for the Mercers' Company. These discoveries have now been published in *Scribes and the City: London Guildhall Clerks and the Dissemination of Middle English Literature 1375-1425* by Linne R. Mooney and Estelle Stubbs. York Medieval Press / Boydell & Brewer, 2013. Available to order, price £35, from Boydell & Brewer.