

8-31-2013

Court Poetry in Late Medieval England and Scotland, by Anthony Hasler

Holly A. Crocker
University of South Carolina

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Crocker, Holly A. (2013) "Court Poetry in Late Medieval England and Scotland, by Anthony Hasler," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 39: Iss. 1, 247–251.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol39/iss1/20>

This Book Reviews is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

REVIEW

Anthony J. Hasler, *Court Poetry in Late Medieval England and Scotland: Allegories of Authority*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 80. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. x, 253. \$90.00. ISBN: 9780521809573.

Anthony J. Hasler's *Court Poetry in Late Medieval England and Scotland: Allegories of Authority* achieves more than it claims for itself. The book is framed by a series of modest propositions: 1) English and Scottish poetry between 1485 and 1528 is shaped by the experience of court service; 2) the unstable sources of authority that influence English writers John Skelton, Stephen Hawes, and Alexander Barclay, as well as Scottish writers William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas, inflects the shifting subjectivity explored in their literary productions; 3) in their representations of late-medieval literary patronage, these poets evince a yearning for identification that invariably ends in failure; 4) in their renderings of literary authority, these poets frequently avail themselves of allegory in order to displace the failures of identification that emerge within literatures that imagine the court as a space of subject formation for poet and patron alike. These are ideas that scholars of late medieval and early modern poetry have seen before. Even so, in Hasler's capable hands, these contentions become more than critical commonplaces, moving beyond any mere suggestion of the mutual destabilization of subject formation and literary production.

Hasler is careful to distinguish the historical circumstances that differentiate English and Scottish court service, but he considers these poets together because they share similar literary preoccupations. And, while this period is usually treated on the way from or to another point in literary history, Hasler focuses welcome attention on this era's

particularities in order to capture its poetic distinctiveness. This is not simply a project that seeks to establish continuities between these poets and their predecessors or successors. Though Hasler might ask questions that are similar to those that have been asked about Chaucer, Gower, or Lydgate (the poetic triumvirate invoked by many of the poets included in this study), and though his focus on the stultifying intensity of court service might look forward to poetic production in the later years of Henrican rule, *Court Poetry in Late Medieval England and Scotland* ends up offering a startlingly new reading of subjectivity as it is imagined by Scottish and English writers after the accession of Henry VII.

This intervention is accumulative more than argumentative. It is only through the adumbration of poetic details that a new view of the subject—one based on invisibility, displacement, and secrecy—begins to emerge. Hasler makes no direct argument for this appearance as a unique innovation. Yet, through a series of detailed and nuanced readings, Hasler establishes a common poetic interest in an obscured subject, one whose disavowal and oblivion becomes at once a gesture of self-cancellation and self-preservation. In Chapter 1, which takes up the Latin writings of Bernard André as well as William Dunbar's *The Thrissill and the Rois*, blindness itself enables the figuration of patronal authority. After accompanying Henry VII back to England, where he served as "historiographer royal" to the new regime (21), André's *Vita Henrici Septimi* develops the poet's blindness as a literary trope to emphasize the light of Henry's royal patronage. The poet's avowed frailty, his sightless dependence on the king's glory, obscures any troubling details of dynastic succession. Rather, as Hasler observes, "André's blindness hides them in plain sight" (26). Dunbar's *Thrissill and the Rois* is similarly invested in spectacular elevation, but this heraldic allegory suggests language itself can serve as a dazzling cover for hidden interests. As a work of counsel, the poem fashions a disciplined sovereign, but the poet's alterity, Hasler argues, emerges from the poem's blindness regarding its author's presence.

Chapter 2 thinks more deeply about the poetics of disavowal by posing "the birth of the paranoid subject" in John Skelton's *Bowge of Courte*. Hasler suggests Skelton "ask[s] precisely the question of what a 'court' poetry might be" (43). In doing so, Skelton crafts a dense allegory that investigates the fears that accompany service to those whose power might move through unseen and unmarked channels. Hasler connects this poem to the Privy Chamber's rise in influence at the court of Henry VII, but, rather than suggesting with other critics that Skelton simply satirizes

the growing emphasis on clandestine control, Hasler argues “that *The Bowge* promotes not a critique of secret royal power, but its very replication” (45). Chapter 3, which treats William Dunbar’s petitionary poems, is equally interested in the ways that literary conventions can serve to obscure the speaker’s vulnerability. If Skelton positions his *The Bowge* as a means of surveillance over his readers, Dunbar uses the begging poem to construct a more malleable poetic subject, whose serviceable fluidity might complement the dominant visibility of the powerful patron. Because James IV was invested in cultivating a spectacular royal presence, Dunbar employs what Hasler characterizes as “indirect vision” to legitimate his poetic authority. Compared to other rivals, upon whom Dunbar “seems chiefly concerned to bestow a disfiguring visibility” (70), the poet constructs a petitioner whose body is enfeebled by devoted service. It is only through the restorative intercession of the king that the petitioner’s suffering might be alleviated.

Hasler continues to investigate poetic strategies of displacement in Chapter 4, which sets Alexander Barclay’s *Eclogues* against Gavin Douglas’s *Palice of Honour*. In the former the poet exists exclusively through the medium of translation, while in the latter the repudiation of bodily integrity addresses the spectacle of court production. In both instances the precarity of the poet means he has no place from whence to speak. Meditations on exile and death also loom large in Chapter 5, which treats the veiling mechanisms of rhetoric in Stephen Hawes’s *The Pastime of Pleasure* and *The Comfort of Lovers*. Using a “rhetoric of secrecy,” Hawes “is thus able to establish a new and powerful space for a vernacular voice” (128). Hawes uses allegory to enact a radical surrender of self, an annihilation that propels *The Pastime* to its paradoxical conclusion, which exists “suspended between time and eternity” (125). In *The Comfort of Lovers* Hawes sets forth tropes that remain ever unfulfilled. By founding his poem on the multiplicity of “truth,” Hawes makes the declamatory strategies of the petitionary poem into a covert commentary on court politics. The combination of genres in *The Comfort*, Hasler ultimately concludes, links love-complaint and political prophesy through a shared motion of deferral: “Sexual consummation with the lady thus stands in the same relation to the love-fiction as the Apocalypse does to human history, an intervention from outside time, an epiphany in which signs are no longer covert” (135). This desire can never be fulfilled, and so, Hasler concludes, “Hawes’s final poem is thus left in exhausted and isolated pathos” (143).

Chapter 6 returns Hasler to an analysis of Skelton in the early 1520s. Like Hawes at the accession of Henry VIII, Skelton suffers from what Hasler calls a “crisis of symbolic investiture” (145). This predicament, which emerges in poems including *Speke Parrott* and *The Garlande of Laurell*, produces a poetics that unhinges authority through rapid shifts in genre and voice. With its emphasis on paradisaical loss, which is paired with erotic desire, *Speke Parrott* makes Cardinal Wolsey into “the matter to be glossed” (153). In *The Garlande of Laurell*, Skelton grapples with the ability for voice or body to substantiate poetic authority. Hasler moves past analyses of Skelton’s poetic (over)confidence to focus on the effects of this poem’s formal heterogeneity. The combination of dream vision, debate, lyric, catalogue, and invective fails to yield a consolidated poetic authority. The shiftiness of this identity is taken up most memorably in the figure of the woman’s body, which, Hasler suggests, “tropes several forms of material contingency—the ‘occasionality’ of the poem’s origin, its dependence on a patron’s demand, the sliding signs of the mother tongue” (166). Rather than read *The Garlande* as a symptom of misogynist authorial production, Hasler argues Skelton exposes rather than endorses the antifeminist foundation of humanism’s rhetorical eloquence. In the book’s conclusion, Hasler continues his consideration of Skelton by analyzing his last poem, *A Replycacion Agaynst Certayne Yonge Scolers Abjured of Late*, which also indicates the poet’s literary disembodiment. As an art of substitution and displacement, allegory captures the fears of bodily transformation that afflict Skelton and his near contemporaries.

With a final glance at the work of Sir David Lyndsay, Hasler underscores the fraught relationship between poet and patron in the literature of this era. To be concerned with the king—or with the consolidation of the patron’s powerful persona—is to declare one’s own feebleness and inadequacy. The abject body of the poet, therefore, is always a disabling counterpoint to the spectacular wholeness of the court patron. The feature that renews this rather familiar critical contention, as I hope I have conveyed, is the poetic density and texture that Hasler marshals in its support. Rather than read these texts outward, with appeals to historical particularity that situate allegorical reference, Hasler gathers a poetic nexus that affirms the clustering of cultural norms around poetic expressions of a specific era. This method does not isolate any given text, or treat it as a unity of meaning unto itself. Instead, the stylistic fissures in this body of verse show the places where historicity pervades even the most totalizing allegories. Above all, it is allegory’s displacements that

become visible through Hasler's deft investigation of the covert, secret, or invisible subject pursued by Scottish and English poets between 1485 and 1528. With this analysis, in particular, Hasler demonstrates the literary innovations of these writers and provides a needed reassessment of their importance to court literatures before and after this period.

Holly A. Crocker

University of South Carolina