

Review

A Companion to Middle English Prose

Ed. A.S.G. Edwards

Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004

ISBN 1-84384-018-9; pp x+334, indexed

RRP \$130.00/£ 65.00

This collection represents the timely and welcome follow up to the essays on prose writings collected by A.S.G. Edwards into the 1984 *Middle English Prose: A Critical Guide to Major Authors and Genres*, and the culmination of almost 20 years of research into prose since the publication of the original study.¹ The present volume recognises sustained advances in the identification and study of prose texts in Middle English, both facilitated in no small way by the consistent publication of additions to the *Index to Middle English Prose*, and the "increase in editorial activity that has made more texts available...in modern editions" (vii). The *Companion* retains the structure of the 1984 edition – papers on authors and categories of text – that have been either updated by some of the original contributors, or re-worked by new participants. Some new material, such as the essay on "Private Letters" by Richard Beadle (289-306), combine with updated material to give the student of Middle English prose a useful overview of current, and necessary, research in this field.

Since work on manuscript evidence of Middle English prose is current and ongoing, and the production of modern editions is consequently a slow process, it is necessary that the strict categorisation of authors and texts, as displayed in the *Companion*, is maintained until availability of texts allows us to think about connections that exist between works of apparently diverse nature. The volume goes some way towards encouraging this; George Keiser's article, "Scientific, Medical and Utilitarian Prose" (231-247) replaces two individual articles in the 1984 *Guide* with an overview of recent advances in this area.² Whilst the original papers offered useful lists of manuscripts (effectively, catalogues of known texts), and bibliographies, representing scholarship to date in terms of Medical and Scientific prose

¹ New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1984.

² Linda Ehrtam Voigts, "Medical Prose" (315-335), & Laurel Braswell, "Utilitarian and Scientific Prose", (337-387).

respectively, the absence of, in particular, a list of manuscripts, in Keiser's article must acknowledge recent interest, discoveries, and the continued availability of bibliographical tools. The merging of two original articles into one is not indicative of a lack of inherent value of these texts; rather, it encourages the student to examine such texts not in isolation, but in regard to context and transmission, and as "central to an understanding of literary, social, intellectual, political, and cultural history" (242). Similarly, the inclusion of separate papers on Chaucer's prose, Malory's *Morte Darthur* and the *Ancrene Wisse*, has been decided against, in favour of commentary dispersed throughout the volume; this too, despite the editors' valid contention that extensive work has recently been carried out on all three (vii), perhaps reflects a future move towards more fluid categories, and work which will emphasise connections rather than divisions.

Middle English prose has, in the past, often been neglected in favour of verse, and the scope, and calibre, of research in the *Companion*, above all, firmly establishes and surveys the valuable work already carried out and emphasises a "sense of the distinctive literary qualities of the work(s)" presented here. It must also, however, provide the student of lesser-known prose works with a useful and authoritative research tool, which collects and surveys important advances, and encourages new directions.

Reviewed by:

Carrie Griffin, University College, Cork, Ireland

Email: c.griffin@student.ucc.ie