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Notices of Books Received

Eric Gerald Stanley, *In the Foreground Beowulf* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994). xiv, 273. £35.00, \$US63.00.

Eric Stanley, Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor Emeritus of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Oxford, after teaching at Birmingham, London, and Yale, is internationally famous amongst scholars of Old and Middle English. The present book is an unusual, controversial, and very learned attack on many past and present opinions held by scholars and critics about Old English poetry. He emphasizes the limitations of our knowledge and of all readers' historical conditioning and expectations. His survey of *Beowulf* scholarship and criticism is illuminating and appropriately humbling for all critics and scholars of any period, and his detailed technical comments on metres and poetic diction lead to a new understanding. In particular, his section on the centrality of Christian prayer, praise, and thanksgiving in Old English poetry, especially *Beowulf*, will bring about a significant shift in the general understanding of the poem.

Professor Stanley has taken a prominent part in the University of Toronto-based *Dictionary of Old English* now in progress.

Murray J. Evans, *Rereading Middle English Romance: Manuscript Layout, Decoration, and the Rhetoric of Composite Structure* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994). 208. \$Can. 44.95.

Focussing on features of layout and decoration in manuscripts containing Middle English romances, Murray Evans, Professor of English at the University of Winnipeg, discusses how these details signal generic and structural relationships among texts. Using a computer-assisted survey to tabulate and quantify features of description and presentation in fifteen manuscript collections, including the "Auchinleck" MS and Cambridge University Library MS Ff.2.36, he demonstrates that romances are decorated more generously than other kinds of texts.

With reference to features of layout and decorations, Professor Evans interprets *Guy of Warwick* as a composite work, not separate works as some scholars have suggested. Examining *Sir Isumbras* as a homiletic romance, and *Sir Dégaré* and *Sir Orfeo* as Middle English lays, he shows how different versions of these romances, in their varied composite manuscript contexts, necessitate different readings of the "same" works and of their subgenres. He considers the manuscript structure of groups of works with different authorship and establishes six models of composite literary structure for Middle English Literature.

Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992; rpt. 1993). xii, 365. \$US29.95 cloth, \$US18.99 paper.

This important new critical bibliography traces in carefully considered detail what is known of Geoffrey Chaucer's personal life while exploring the fascinating relationship between the man of affairs, who made so many "improvisations and accommodations" to ensure his own survival, and the poet. Derek Pearsall, Gurney Professor of English at Harvard University, shows that Chaucer's immersion in his troubled times was more intimately expressed in his work than is admitted by traditional accounts. The "accommodations" of his public life are seen as being of a piece with the habitual irony, the studied elusiveness of the poetry, in which almost everything that could be construed as comment on contemporary events is avoided.

This major reexamination of England's greatest narrative poet is supplemented with reproductions of Chaucer's portraits and other illustrations, including maps of mediaeval London.

Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall, eds., *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375-1475* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). xix, 463.

This volume is part of the Cambridge Studies in Publishing and Printing History, under the general editorship of Terry Belanger and David McKitterick. The series of studies, by experts in the relevant fields, is the first comprehensively and systematically to examine British book production and publishing in the hundred years before the introduction of printing.

The term "book" and "publishing" are usually employed in reference to the products of the printing press. This collection of essays (fifteen in all, plus Professor Pearsall's introduction and four appendices), however, deals with the manuscript book, its materials and make-up, the people who made, commissioned, and read such books, the kinds of reading matter they wanted, and the way books catered for — and created — the reading and book-buying public. Special attention is paid to the increasing systemization and commercialization of production. These essays constitute a valuable work of reference for scholars and students in a wide range of disciplines.

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