
David Watt’s *The Making of Thomas Hoccleve’s ‘Series’* is the first book-length study of Thomas Hoccleve’s *Series*. In focusing in detail on one particular poetic work of Hoccleve’s, Watt’s book has a counterpart in Nicholas Perkins’s *Hoccleve’s ‘Regiment of Princes’: Counsel and Constraint* (2001), which focuses on Hoccleve’s other major work, *The Regiment of Princes*. Watt’s book also follows in the wake of Ethan Knapp’s 2001 monograph exploring the interplay between bureaucratic and literary identity in the poet’s work. It contributes to ongoing critical re-evaluations of fifteenth-century literature in the context of heresy and orthodox reform, developments in the understanding of late medieval book production, and attempts to reconstitute networks of scribes, readers, and patrons of vernacular poetry in late medieval London. It offers a welcome addition to the evolving critical conversation on Hoccleve’s works, and expands in inventive ways on these existing critical discourses.

Watt’s concern throughout is with the ‘making’ of Hoccleve’s *Series* – a word that denotes at once the physical process of book production, the story that the poem itself tells of its own production, and the social, ecclesiastical, and political contexts that align in Hoccleve’s narrative. It considers both why Hoccleve presents himself the way he does in the *Series*, and how given readers might have responded to, and used, Hoccleve’s text. In each chapter, Watt reads the *Series* through a given Hocclevian manuscript; and in doing so, he uses each chapter to illuminate a different context, theme, and/or question relevant to both the *Series* and the manuscript in question. The first chapter, for instance, considers the audience that Hoccleve might have expected for his *Series*; and Watt explores the question in part by examining the range of intended readers and contacts named in one of Hoccleve’s autograph verse manuscripts, San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 111. Another chapter explores the relevance of booklets to the process of book-making in San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 744, and to the construction of the poetic narrative in the *Series*. Two chapters focus on the *Series* in the context of orthodox reform and lay devotional reading by considering the poem as it appears in its autograph version (Durham, University Library, MS Cosin V.iii.9), and in parallel with Hoccleve’s formulary (London, British Library, Additional MS 24062). The final chapter then turns to consider the poem as it appears in the most authoritative non-autograph manuscript of the *Series* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Selden supra 53), and uses the contents of that manuscript to consider the role of the *Series* as a textual mirror.

While the structure of Watt’s book – using a given manuscript as a spur to considering a given aspect of the *Series* – sometimes leads him to stretch a comparison (such as in his parallel reading of the *Series* and the formulary), it works well overall, and allows Watt to engage Hoccleve’s various energies as a poet, scribe, and translator. Among the more notable contributions of the study is Watt’s consideration of Hoccleve’s matrix of readers, and the way these readers manifest in his poetry – named, unnamed, intended, and implied. Watt’s
discussion of potential audiences in the first chapter in particular has relevance not only for the *Series*, but also for the broader range of Hoccleve’s works and for our understanding of how Hoccleve’s poetry operated. Watt’s reading of the positioning of the *Series* among textual mirrors in MS Selden supra 53, and his consideration of the role and function of the miniature in that manuscript, offer the reader a rich appreciation of the way in which one such reader – the Selden scribe – responded to Hoccleve’s poem. Most of all, the book underscores the value of reading Hoccleve intertextually – reading his various works as interrelated and interrelatable entities, and using the format and construction of Hoccleve’s unique autograph manuscripts as one means through which to approach the equally unique content of his poetry.

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Bodleian MS Ashmole 48, best known for its inclusion of ‘The Hunting of the Cheviot’, has long been acknowledged as a ‘minstrel manuscript’. In this book, Andrew Taylor adds depth and colour to that description, giving us the most complete account of the volume itself and its probable owner that is ever likely to be produced. He suggests that it was assembled around 1556–8 by Richard Sheale, a minstrel from Tamworth who was patronized by Edward Stanley, 3rd Earl of Derby, a member of the family whose exploits are recorded in various of the miscellany’s poems. Sheale’s name appears at the end of five of the poems it contains; one, the ‘Hunting’ itself, certainly pre-dates him, but Taylor accepts the other four ascriptions, and adds two more. One is the so-called ‘Stanley Poem’, implausibly ascribed in the nineteenth century to Thomas Stanley, Bishop of Sodor and Man; the other is a set of skeltonics that Taylor entitles ‘Within the North Country’, which names the English lords who were assembled at Berwick in 1558. Not the least interesting element of the book is the identification of some of its contents not as copies of printed broadside ballads, as had been assumed, but as sources of ballads printed later. Sheale, in other words, extended his travels not only from Tamworth and the Stanley country as far as Berwick, but to London too, where he was able to supply the ballad printers with new copy. A last-minute footnote, indeed, notes the recent discovery by Anne Lancashire of the admission of Richard Sheale to the London ‘ffelowshippe of the mynstrelles’ on the Earl of Derby’s recommendation and the payment of forty shillings (p. 31).

The value of the book lies in this thick contextualization of the life of a travelling minstrel at the end of Mary’s reign, not in any qualities of the poetry. Taylor describes him in his first sentence as ‘minstrel, harper and mediocre poet’,