

Reviews

REVIEW: Andrew Galloway. *Medieval Literature and Culture: A Student Guide*. Introductions to British Literature and Culture 1. London: Continuum, 2006.

Somewhere deep within the *City of God*, Augustine of Hippo tells that marvelous story of his meeting a young child on a seashore. The child was attempting, one scallop shell at a time, to ladle the entire ocean into a small hole he had dug for himself in the sand. After first asking the child what he was doing, Augustine commented to the young lad about the futility of his task. The child—in one account reputed to have been the Christ Child Himself – responded about the similar impossibility of reducing the cosmic experience of the Holy Trinity into the human soul. According to the legend, the child then vanished, leaving our hero to ponder his own life and ministry and perhaps wonder why he had been uniquely blessed by the vision.

That medieval analogy of the child and Augustine—whose impact upon early continental medieval thought remains profound to this day—may well be the best way to start to understand *Medieval Literature and Culture*. Andrew Galloway, a well-respected authority on *The Vision of Piers the Ploughman*, has done everything humanly possible to reduce one millennium of British cultural and literary history to a paperback volume of just slightly under 150 pages. But, then again, that was his assignment. The goal of the general editors of this series includes the following:

Introductions to British Literature and Culture are practical guides to key literary periods. Guides in this series are designed to help introduce a new module or area of study, providing concise information on the historical, literary and critical contexts and acting as an initial map of the knowledge needed to study the literature and culture of a specific period.

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By following the comprehensive goal established by this series' general editors, Galloway—after a customary introduction – organizes his efforts into four chapters: (1) Political, Intellectual and Cultural

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Contexts; (2) Medieval English Literature: Genres; (3) Critical Approaches; and finally (4) Resources for Independent Study.

Let me consider the last chapter first. It is more tabular data than text. Several easy-to-follow charts put a historical frame of reference to this millennium of chronology. There is a glossary of common terms. The bibliography is solid, not at all pretentious or overpowering, and contains a healthy mix of well-respected post-war scholarship along with works having a twenty-first century date. It also contains suggestions for web-based resources. This chapter alone—as a starting point for a new undergraduate student—could well be worth the price of the book.

In the primary three chapters, where he aims at his editors' goal of writing "this practical guide," Galloway created an incredibly concentrated text: not as arcane as is so characteristic of the scholars who write for the legendary Boydell and Brewer publishing house nor as dense as one might expect from scholars who present at the Leeds Congress—but concentrated—none-the-less. Every sentence contains some valuable tidbits of information that a reader—and reviewer—could miss without slowing down, rolling the text around in his or her mind, permitting its genuine nuances to expand. Perhaps one needs to mystically associate Galloway's text to a bottle of fine century-old brandy (or perhaps a twenty-year old single-malt scotch) which has to be opened up, a small amount quietly poured into large brandy snifter style glass, spun around a bit to permit its natural aroma to taunt the discreet consumer, and then absorbed slowly.

That is the grace of this work.

But there is also fault and that is singularly unfortunate. What I found most annoying is that the introduction, alone, could well frighten off the casual reader before the condensed main text can be expanded and enjoyed. In fact, this introduction almost frightened me off. I was halfway through analyzing those opening passages for the first time when I paused to e-mail Galloway and challenge him about some well-accepted undergraduate conventions of coherent composition. (One sentence alone has 135 words.) His reply was essentially, "That's the way I write. Read on."

Returning to the image in my opening paragraph, I am very much like Augustine, trying to challenge the futility of cramming the

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accumulated wisdom of a full millennium of British culture into 148 pages. All in all, however, I think Galloway does a credible job, which I would award an overall grade of C++.

Norbert A. Wethington, Oberlin College

Medieval literature and culture. Item Preview. remove-circle. Medieval literature and culture. by. Galloway, Andrew. Publication date. 2006. Topics. English literature -- Middle English, 1100-1500 -- History and criticism, Civilization, Medieval, in literature. Publisher. London ; New York : Continuum. There are no reviews yet. Be the first one to write a review. In just over 150 pages, Andrew Galloway gives an accessible, wide-ranging and cohesive overview of sprawling near-millennium of British history and literature, as well as more than 450 years of subsequent literary study, without over-simplifying his subject matter.'- Alyssa McDonald, TLS. 'As the first publication in a new series of introductory guides to 'key literary periods', Medieval Literature and Culture sets a daunting precedent for the forthcoming books. In just over 150 pages, Andrew Galloway gives an accessible, wide-ranging and cohesive overview of sprawling near-millennium of British history and literature, as well as more than 450 years of subsequent literary study, without over-simplifying his subject matter.'- Alyssa McDonald, TLS. Medieval Literature and Culture : A Student Guide by Andrew Galloway (2007, UK-Trade Paper) at the best online prices at eBay! Free shipping for many products! Reviews. 'As the first publication in a new series of introductory guides to 'key literary periods', Medieval Literature and Culture sets a daunting precedent for the forthcoming books. In just over 150 pages, Andrew Galloway gives an accessible, wide-ranging and cohesive overview of sprawling near-millennium of British history and literature, as well as more than 450 years of subsequent literary study, without over-simplifying his subject matter.' Medieval vernacular literature evolved naturally from the folktale which was a story recited, probably with the storyteller acting out different parts, before an audience. Medieval English literature begins with Beowulf (7th-10th century CE) which was no doubt a story known much earlier and transmitted orally until written down. This same pattern of development holds for the literature of other countries as well. The storyteller would gather an audience and perform his or her tale, usually with variations based on the audience, and members of that audience would then retell the story to others The Guide to Medieval Literature and Culture provides students with the ideal introduction to literature and its context from Andrew Galloway is Professor of English and Medieval Studies at Cornell University. He is the author of The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman, Vol. I (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), and numerous essays and chapters on medieval literature.