

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Cook, Megan L. The Poet and the Antiquaries: Chaucerian Scholarship and the Rise of Literary History, 1532–1635

Dan Breen

Volume 45, Number 1, Winter 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094228ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i1.39123>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Breen, D. (2022). Review of [Cook, Megan L. The Poet and the Antiquaries: Chaucerian Scholarship and the Rise of Literary History, 1532–1635]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 45(1), 198–200.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i1.39123>

© Dan Breen, 2022



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Cook, Megan L.

The Poet and the Antiquaries: Chaucerian Scholarship and the Rise of Literary History, 1532–1635.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Pp. ix, 278 + 12 ill. ISBN 978-0-8122-5082-4 (hardcover) US\$59.95.

As a poet and as a more broadly significant cultural figure, Geoffrey Chaucer has, at least since his death, been a creation of his readers. As such, the various literary-historical versions of Chaucer that have emerged over the years reflect the preoccupations of those readers, as scholars such as Seth Lerer, Helen Cooper, and Stephanie Trigg have shown. Fifteenth-century English poets from Lydgate to Skelton lauded Chaucer as the originator of a tradition of vernacular poetry to which they hoped to contribute, just as liberal humanist literary critics of the early and mid-twentieth century sought to locate in Chaucer's writing forms of premodern, paternalistic toleration. The capacity of Chaucer's poetry to invite forms of identification from such disparate audiences has for some time been a subject of critical study, yet as Megan L. Cook shows in her book *The Poet and the Antiquaries*, the relationship between Chaucer and his readers may in fact tell us a good deal more. Valuable as they have been, previous studies of this subject have focused most closely on the construction of Chaucer as a literary figure by specifically literary audiences. However, some of Chaucer's early readers—including those responsible for bringing his poetry from manuscript into print in the sixteenth century—were not, or at least not solely, poets or literary critics but antiquarians. Emphasizing the textual, lexical, and biographical work of Chaucer's Tudor antiquarian editors, Cook argues that the Tudor portrayal of Chaucer is one shot through with broader concerns about English political, religious, and aesthetic history. In presenting Chaucer as a figure in whom various strands of English history come together, antiquarian readers made a powerful claim for the role of historiographical thought and practice in the shaping of literary tradition.

Following a programmatic chapter on early printings of Chaucer's work, Cook turns to early accounts of Chaucer's life. Published in 1598 with his edition of Chaucer's poetry, Thomas Speght's *Life* constitutes the first English-language biography of Chaucer (and Speght is for many reasons a figure of particular significance in Cook's study). Yet, as Cook shows, Speght's work is deeply indebted to John Leland's entry on Chaucer in his *De Viris Illustribus*.

From Leland, Speght inherited not simply a wealth of (occasionally spurious) biographical detail, but an assessment of Chaucer's symbolic historical value. The representation of Chaucer in *De Viris* seeks to establish English literary tradition as possessed of a gravity comparable to that which characterizes Continental literatures. Speght's audience, then, experiences Chaucer as both an effective and adept poet and as a figure that asserts a particular version of English antiquity. The nature of this antiquity was itself remarkably malleable, as Cook shows in chapter 3, which addresses the various ways in which Chaucer and certain texts attributed to him, notably the *Plowman's Tale*, were conscripted into polemical efforts to establish the putatively ancient origins of the Church of England.

Antiquarian practice in fact proved to be flexible enough to incorporate aspects of poetic practice in its work. In a fascinating chapter on Speght's editions of Chaucer in 1598 and 1602, Cook demonstrates that the prefatory epistles and Speght's Middle English lexicon, are influenced by E. K.'s glosses in Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*. The chapter thus shows the ways in which antiquarian readers are conscious of the utility of the past both in terms of its capacity to establish cultural genealogies and of its more direct relationship to contemporary writing. Using Spenser's Chaucerisms as a way to interpret Chaucer illustrates the complex treatment of temporality produced by antiquarian interpretation and writing, which Cook refers to elsewhere in the book as temporal "doubleness." Chaucer's language and his poetry generate a cultural authority based in part on its chronological remoteness. Yet that authority can only be fully understood through methods of study that must be deployed in the present. The capacity of antiquarian practice to incorporate not only poetry but other forms of writing and thinking extends through a remarkable variety of disciplines, as the book demonstrates in further chapters that explore both heraldry and early seventeenth-century scholarship.

At this point, it might be noted that it is possible that Cook's base definition of "antiquarian"—"someone with a professional or abiding personal interest in the details of the English past" (5)—is constituted too broadly. However, this breadth serves an important conceptual function. By theorizing the figure of the antiquarian in a way that creates space for a multitude of practices, the book reflects more directly the approaches of Tudor antiquarians in their own work, and enables a view of early modern intellectual disciplines as complementary and as grouped according to largely permeable conceptual divisions.

As a result, the book provides a model for early modernists in particular studying understandings of literary history and the medieval past in Tudor England. *The Poet and the Antiquaries* is able to suggest that present-day disciplinary distinctions are too often applied to medieval and early modern forms of writing. While it is certainly true that medieval and early modern readers understood literary and historical texts as distinct, it is also the case, as Cook shows, that literary and historical thought and practice were on the whole quite closely aligned. Her book, then, offers to the field an approach through which we might derive a much fuller understanding of fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and early seventeenth-century writing if we begin by considering literature and history as involved in different aspects of the same cultural project.

DAN BREEN

Ithaca College

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i1.39123>