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Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England (review)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6sw1d4nj>

Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 29(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

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Publication Date

1998-10-01

Peer reviewed

REVIEWS

Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 216 pp.

Judith Ferster's *Fictions of Advice* argues for a rereading of medieval mirrors for princes, against their traditional characterization as repetitive, platitudinous moral tracts. Much as David Lawton's well-known article on dullness did for the fifteenth century,⁵ Ferster aims to 'historicize' the function of books of advice as conscious attempts at couching dangerous political criticism in the safer language of moral platitudes. In other words, she proposes to look at the manuals for their hermeneutical value, as instances of what—by way of Annabel Patterson's 1984 study, *Censorship and Interpretation*—she calls "public discourse."⁶ Ferster's introductory chapter sets up the book's most general aim: to refute Stephen Greenblatt's Foucauldian theory of ideology as a monolithic entity that produces its own 'resistance' in order to reincorporate it within its all-encompassing structure. She suggests, concerning the later Middle Ages, what Patterson argued regarding the early-modern period in England, that censorship allows for and actually enables "the possibility of opposition." (p. 5) If Ferster's study is ultimately unsatisfying, it is because it sometimes relies on a version of Patterson's argument, without really making its own argument entirely clear.

The related issues of censorship, advice, and political initiative in late-medieval England are fascinating ones, and Ferster presents her material clearly. She begins with the ninth-century Arabic pseudo-Aristotelian manual for princes, translated into Latin as the *Secretum Secretorum*, one that she takes as prototypical of the genre. The tract was translated several times in the following six centuries, both into Latin and into European vernaculars, forming the basis for, most famously, Book 7 of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and less directly, according to characteristics common to the genre, for Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*. The chronology here is crucial: the period in between the *Secretum's* original composition and its later redactions is generally characterized by scholars as a period of gradual decline in the power of the European monarchy as an institution; that decline is seen to culminate in, among other things, the rise of parliaments and the concomitant establishment, in England, of the Commons as a political force. In this regard, Ferster presents medieval England as a centralized entity, with the Commons representing the nation as a whole, first in the persons of the baronial magnates, in the time of King John and Magna Carta, and by the fourteenth century in the persons of the gentry or lesser landowners.

It is around these political issues that the main argument of *Fictions of Advice* coalesces. Ferster maintains that the developing conflict between the institutions of monarchy and republican government were dictated by "struggles over advice," leading eventually to the establishment of limited monarchy in England. Ferster's argument is a useful and interesting one, especially as a way of conceptualizing the increasing references to counsel in medieval English literature after Geoffrey of Monmouth. The link to the *Secretum* is, however, sometimes less than explicit,

⁵ "Dullness and the Fifteenth Century," *English Literary History* 54 (1987): 761–799.

⁶ *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison, 1984).

except as a general representative of a larger, conventional genre of advice to rulers.

Considering the short shrift that historical events sometimes get in the book—I am thinking particularly of the quick overview of fourteenth-century political conflicts, involving such figures as Peter de la Mare, “speaker of the Commons,” and the ecclesiastical official Thomas Haxey, in Chapter 2—it may be appropriate to reconsider the central argument of Ferster’s study at this point. In order to be applicable as a hermeneutical concept, as a way of reading politics as well as literature, the emphasis on specifically political advice seems to need more specific and more substantial consideration. Perhaps a more inclusive, though no less potentially controversial, claim is one that Ferster herself mentions. It is a claim made by Bertie Wilkinson in the 1950’s, in his study of English constitutional history. As Ferster points out, Wilkinson argued that it was the deposition of Edward II in 1327 that set the stage for justifying succeeding depositions, including most immediately that of Richard II. According to Wilkinson, Edward’s deposition set a precedent toward direct participation by the magnates and the gentry in English political life and formed the basis of parliamentary monarchy.

Wilkinson’s and Ferster’s arguments both allow room for further discussion on this point. The political and historical issues involved with the rise of parliament and the ascendancy of the commons have been and remain bewilderingly complex. E. Talbot Donaldson recognized in 1966,⁷ for instance, that even etymologically, the term “commons” on its own presents considerable difficulties that straddle the line between its official capacity as a governmental body and its specific role within the realm, as representative of the entire “community.” The complexity of Parliament’s role, and that of the Commons within it, sometimes leads scholars to other, more questionable claims. The temptation to reduce that complexity in the direction of an exclusive conflict between two parties, the declining monarchy and the ascendant Parliament, is endemic in the historical tradition, and it is one sometimes repeated by literary scholars. It is evident in Patterson’s study as well. Her argument against Greenblatt—and by implication against Foucault—often ends by subscribing to his two-tiered model of conflict between a ruling ideology and oppositional tendencies. But the question concerning the Commons and the larger one of the role of parliamentary process may, in the end, revolve less around a polarized conflict between monarchic and parliamentary rule; allowing for a workable definition of Parliament and its political role, the character that the English polity presented in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries may turn on a close scrutiny of the relative strength of different, changing factions in English government.

Ferster’s study indirectly inherits some of the simple, two-tiered oppositions between discourse and dissent long a part of historical analyses of the English parliament in the Middle Ages, on the one hand, and literary studies of public discourse such as Patterson’s, on the other. In the discussion of the relevant historical background in Chapter 2, for instance, Ferster discusses the spread of information and the growing link between capital and locality in the course of the fourteenth century. Ferster seems to imply, however, that these functional social and legal developments in fact amounted to the kinds of significant changes in

⁷“The Politics of the C-Reviser,” in *Piers Plowman: The C-Text and its Poet* (Hamden, CT, 1966), 94.

social life that they were trying to bring about, rather than to mere symptoms of those changes. It may be more accurate to say that those changes themselves depended on a more gradual historical shift—in other words, on slower, broader, and more subtle changes in the ideological structure and social conditions of late-medieval English society.

Ferster is right to point out, along with Anthony Tuck and Chris Given-Wilson,⁸ that political initiative between the reigns of Edward II and Richard II depended largely on a difficult choice between deposition and advice. But the matter may be more complicated than what that reading may seem to suggest: that this choice was available to an established lordly class and an increasingly powerful gentry, in simple opposition to a monarchy whose absolute power was being radically undermined. After all, quite apart from the structure of censorship, much of the “advice” offered to the king was itself profoundly orthodox and relied on equally traditional notions of political authority. One only need remember the “peasants” of 1381—the ostensible constituents of the parliamentary representatives—who sought their freedom in the influence of the commons, and above all of the king. The revolutionary potential of such advice may lie, in fact, less in its critique of a structure imagined as all-encompassing; it may rely equally on a successful harnessing of the power of authority itself. As Ferster correctly points out in the same chapter, both depositions of the fourteenth century were actually successful, and they set a dangerous precedent by establishing the overturning of authority as the basis of authority itself. Yet what they established was precisely a consistent model of authority. Twentieth-century critics and thinkers such as Foucault and Greenblatt may interpret that as a successful reflection of ideology itself, but political actors six centuries earlier may have seen through that interpretation to the radical kernel of truth it contained, hidden, paradoxically, in the structure of authority itself.

Ferster’s study more clearly exemplifies the need to see matters in their own right in its analysis, in Chapter 8, of the *Regement of Princes*, which Hoccleve presented to Prince Henry (later Henry V), presumably in 1412. Ferster discusses the particular relationship between Hoccleve and the future king, considering the literary character that Hoccleve created for himself, and the negotiation among various and complex political relationships that the poem’s writing entailed. With reference to Larry Scanlon’s and Derek Pearsall’s studies of the poet and the period,⁹ she argues that the tension in Hoccleve’s begging poem suggests larger tendencies in the character of monarchical authority: whereas the begging poem was well-suited to Hoccleve’s intention of persuading the king to act on his personal initiative, it went against the conventional dictates of the *regement* genre and its attempt to have the individual king submit to a larger authority, that of the monarchy itself, and later that of the community. Ferster’s arguments regarding Hoccleve’s sure-handed maneuvers coincide with and support an important

⁸ Anthony Tuck, *Crown and Nobility, 1272–1461: Political Conflict in Late Medieval England* (1985; Totowa, NJ, 1986); and Chris Given-Wilson, *The Royal Household and the King’s Affinity: Service, Politics and Finance in England, 1360–1413* (New Haven, CT, 1986).

⁹ Larry Scanlon, “The King’s Two Voices: Narrative and Power in Hoccleve’s *Regement of Princes*,” *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380–1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990): 216–247; and Derek Pearsall, “Hoccleve’s *Regement of Princes*: The Poetics of Royal Self-Representation,” *Speculum* 69 (1994): 386–410.

observation made earlier, in Chapter 5; there (esp. pp. 68–70), in a discussion of the rhetorical conventions of political dissent, Ferster had suggested that arguments regarding constitutional issues often centered on personal motives—the friends of both Edward II and Richard II chose their own political positions, and their opponents often criticized them, according to the material interests the different parties commanded. For instance, Piers Gaveston’s influence over Edward was resented less for its political significance than for the fact that through his influence, Gaveston was able to control the wealth generated by the royal household. Likewise, Hoccleve’s conventional political arguments were primarily influenced by pragmatic considerations. But paradoxically, the insistence on the part of all these individuals—Gaveston, his enemies, and later Hoccleve—on advising the king opened the door to arguments in support of parliamentary prerogative. The gradual growth of such initiative then further centralized government, though in a different direction, by reinforcing its fastest growing institution, Parliament.

It is in difficult paradoxes such as these that the intrinsic interest of the subject Ferster’s book addresses becomes most apparent. In that regard, the complex history of representative government reflects the inherent complexity of the notion and tradition of authority itself, whether medieval or modern. It is the merit of Ferster’s *Fictions of Advice* that it helps to encourage a revival of interest in the political dimension of late-medieval literature of advice, by calling attention to the ways in which calls to authority in late-medieval English politics, almost despite themselves, often turned into calls for revolution.

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