

Book Reviews

HENRY VI AND THE POLITICS OF KINGSHIP. John Watts. 1996.
Cambridge University Press, £40. ISBN 0-521-42039-3

At the heart of any understanding of the causes of the Wars of the Roses must be an assessment of the personal rule of Henry VI. In a highly original piece of political analysis, Watts returns to McFarlane's view of a king totally unable to govern and fashions it into a sustained appraisal of the reign. What makes his approach new and exciting is the marriage of contemporary expectations of good government (derived from fifteenth-century advice books) with a study of the practical problems that arose from Henry VI's failure to exercise his royal will in any consistent form. Watts' thesis challenges the commonly-held assumption that the nobility sought to profit from the confusion engendered by Henry's incapacity. Instead, he argues that the lords of the realm tried to establish a consensus that would enable them to govern on his behalf, for the common good or 'weal'. Thus the familiar story of a self-interested aristocracy, engaged in the pursuit of factional advantage at court and territorial aggrandisement in the localities, is replaced with an altogether different perspective, that of a responsible and politically mature elite, struggling to maintain a unity and coherence of government in exceptionally difficult circumstances.

The implications of this approach are far-reaching, both for our understanding of the fate of the House of Lancaster and the nature of fifteenth-century society as a whole. It is a measure of the courage of Watts' work that he is able to offer many fresh insights into the politics of the period. On the role of the duke of Suffolk in government in the 1440s he is thought-provoking and controversial, arguing that this notoriously unpopular royal minister in fact had the general support of the aristocracy throughout much of his tenure of office. There is also a valuable re-assessment of the achievements of the duke of Somerset's regime in the period 1451-3. A constitutional framework is provided for the manifestoes of the 1450s that allows us an opportunity to view their contents alongside notions of good government, counsel and the policy of the crown. From all this emerges a coherent

explanation of why civil war was delayed for so long: the 'prudence' of the nobility and their adherence to an ideology that sought to unite the political community

How do these ideas affect the established picture, our sense of the troubled decline of the Lancastrian dynasty? In his introduction Watts distances himself from the studies of patronage that have been the staple of fifteenth-century studies in the last forty years. Focus on the world of 'private networks and connections' is seen as unhelpful, even leading, in the author's view, to 'a rather aimless and unenlightening politics' (p. 4). There is an element of polemic behind this generalisation that allows Watts to define through implicit contrast his own interpretive framework. His 'new constitutional history' is thus an exclusive viewpoint. This provides a driving force to his political narrative. But it also sets an overall tone, in which rebuttal of the traditional orthodoxy is often assumed rather than demonstrated. We are assured that Suffolk was not a 'venal courtier' (p. 199), with the somewhat delphic utterance that 'some of the nobility were in a position to exploit proximity to the king, some were not'. Since there is nowhere a rehearsal of the unease felt against Suffolk's regime in East Anglia, so much a feature of *The Paston Letters*, nor any attempt to gauge the personality of the man himself, the ground is left clear for Watts to offer his own construct, that the role of patronage was defined by the politics of the centre.

The virtue of such an approach lies in the intelligence of Watts' thinking, which forces us to re-examine, and in some cases to re-appraise, the expectations and aspirations inherent in late medieval political life. But as with every methodology that claims a primacy of interpretation, hard questions have to be asked of its fundamental assumptions: firstly, that the 'mirror for princes' or advice literature was the *dominant* form in the determination of political ideology; secondly that Henry VI was so incapacitated, so lacking in any form of involvement in the governance of the kingdom, that his majority offered a vacuum in which this ideology could be put into practice.

The first proposition is crucial to Watts' wider argument. Much of his long chapter on the conceptual framework that lay behind the politics of Henry VI's reign makes the entirely reasonable and constructive point that advice-literature appealed to the literary tastes of the fifteenth-century nobility and many of its themes can be found in their discourse. So far, so good. However for Watts to identify a coherent ideology to underpin his constitutional politics he has to demonstrate rather more than that. In short, advice-literature had to be *dominant* in the shaping of political thinking, for if alternative models of equal validity existed (for example a chivalric view of the functions and responsibilities of kingship based on medieval romance) there could be no consensus, and without consensus there could be no consensual politics. And it is here that Watts is unconvincing.

His discussion of aristocratic book ownership is rudimentary and confined to the dissemination of those key texts based on mirror literature (such as Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes*) that support his line of argument. He omits commonplace books, which often contained valuable detail on the practical working of parliament, and it is perhaps not a co-incidence that the role and responsibility of parliament in this period is consistently underestimated (particularly in the crisis of 1449-50). The subordination of the expectations expressed in chivalric treatises rests on introducing a differentiation between defensive or just war, fought in the interests of the national *communitas*, and those which were pursued for conquest and magnificence alone (p. 37). But the two were in no sense mutually exclusive, for the glory and honour achieved in a successful campaign could redound to the credit of the political community as a whole, and in this instance Watts' discussion of the *Boke of Noblesse* seems wide of the mark.

A similar problem besets the author's characterisation of Henry VI. Watts is at his best when he sets himself modest objectives. He sensibly draws attention to the ambiguity of much of the source material when policy was executed in the royal name. There is a real difficulty in assessing the personal impact of Henry's majority and Watts is right to say that acts of government undertaken on the king's behalf do not necessarily inform us of his private beliefs and interests. In his thorough analysis of the records of government he justifiably emphasises the renewal of the formal councils of 1437 and 1441 as evidence of doubt over Henry's capacity to rule. Examples of the king's bland approbation of business matters, his inaction and silence, are all carefully noted. In drawing our attention to Henry's lack of stomach for the responsibilities of high office Watts adds to our understanding of the reign. Yet it is striking that in a monograph confident enough to conclude that Henry VI 'never came to perform the role expected of an adult king' (p. 364), the author is unable to establish fully either that Henry failed to show *any* grasp of affairs in childhood or adolescence, in other words that he was a simpleton, or the consequence of this, that his adult policy was not even fitful, occasional or wilful, but was entirely absent.

The most provocative tenets of Watts' argument are that the concerns most traditionally associated with Henry, educational patronage and the peace policy, were in fact wholly carried out by others. Through seeking to show that Suffolk and other courtiers were behind the foundation of Eton and King's, the evidence of Blacman on Henry's personal involvement is rather blandly set aside. In a puzzling inconsistency, the 'fluctuating interest' that handicapped the project's subsequent progress is nevertheless blamed on the 'vacillation' of the hapless monarch. A similar inherent contradiction undermines Watts' discussion of the peace negotiations. The decision to surrender Maine to the French is seen as the product of a united conciliar policy, 'known to a fair number of important men . . . and

almost certainly agreed by them' (p. 225). Given such a scenario, Watts is unable to explain why Suffolk was later forced to make a nervous protestation to the council that he had acted properly and in good faith over the matter.

Overall, this is a book of considerable merit that benefits but also suffers from its boldness and ambition. The language of politics and the concepts that could unite the governing class are put more firmly on the map, and this is a welcome development. But the removal of Henry VI's kingship from the disturbing trappings of the *devotio moderna*, and the substitution of an impersonal ideology as a complete explanation of the reign, ultimately fails to convince.

MICHAEL K. JONES

CHAUCERIAN POLITY. Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy. David Wallace. 1997. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California. Cambridge University Press, £40

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When German prisoners-of-war in England were re-educated in 1945 they had to be shown how open discussion operates as they discovered democracy. David Wallace's richly textured *Chaucerian Polity* demonstrates the opposite process: the inexorable erosion of associational forms of government during the fourteenth century, in Italy and in Richard II's England. Chaucer lived at a moment of political confidence not repeated for centuries on English territory when people could associate in groups and adopt their own mode of governance from within the group. The General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* posits this horizontal axis, to which the *Clerk's Tale* provides a contrastive vertical axis, and against these modes of collaboration or command all Chaucer's fictions are plotted. Wallace's conclusion shifts into Elizabethan England where, once the guilds and chantries had been abolished in the 1540s, associational groupings are suspect and 'wifely eloquence' no longer operates. The social and political efficacy of wifely eloquence in Wallace's view is the most distinctive feature of Chaucerian polity (p.82).

Wallace's aim is to provide a counterweight to romanticised biographies of Chaucer by supplying a politico-economic context for the oeuvre. He declares himself a literary critic rather than a historian, and demonstrates his theme through primary texts, in Latin and vernaculars, and a vast assemblage of recent historical commentary. The extensive annotation in this volume forms a book in itself. The contrast between the absolutist regime of the Lombard tyrants and the merchant-controlled rule in Florence is viewed in parallel with the similar contrast in

England between oath-based associative groups, in particular the guilds, and the wilfulness of Richard II, which paved the way for the repressive regime of the Lancastrians. On the domestic level this is matched by the collaboration of the husband who listens to wifely wisdom, epitomised in Chaucer's *Melibee*, contrasted with the husband who kills his wife, as Apollo does in *The Manciple's Tale*, a chilling foretaste of Henry VIII's treatment of Anne Boleyn.

Anne Boleyn echoes the Chaucerian women facing masculine anger; *Melibee* is a 'handbook for go-betweens' (p.221) – Wallace excels in these pithy one-liners – and could have had a female patron. Anne of Bohemia, whose companionship and counsel restrained Richard II and whose death in 1394 provoked his increasing tyranny is the heroine of this book. As the final chapter shows, Anne also brought a very different cultural milieu to the English court, one in which Chaucer thrived; her death suppressed that freedom of inspiration which produced Chaucer's most daring work, like the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Summoner's Tale*, set in Holderness, which she held. This positioning of Chaucer within European culture throws open a long-shuttered window on his true achievement; Chaucer's 'sources' are not texts he managed to acquire so much as experiences of different political modes. He operated within the international framework of magnate militarism and merchant exchange, inhabiting both, visiting and moving adroitly between the world of Florentine merchants and Lombard magnates. Wallace says (p.377) that differences between Chaucer's court and non-courtly audiences have been exaggerated, the *Wife of Bath* typifying a crossover from mercantile to court culture.

Wallace's gaze is never still: he moves with easy grace from Italy to England to Bohemia, and from the early fourteenth to the late sixteenth centuries. He stresses the importance of the merchant classes in establishing the renaissance in fourteenth-century Italy and denounces Petrarch, not a harbinger of the renaissance, but acting with 'postmedieval individualism' (p.57). 'Petrak', Chaucer's 'worthy clerk' emerges as a self-seeking, morally retrograde figure who served the Visconti tyrants to Boccaccio's disgust. Wallace opens up Petrarch's correspondence (he wrote compulsively, not even sending some of the letters) and exposes his preposterous self-esteem and contempt for women. But Boccaccio's *Decameron* is expressive of the emergent city-state ideology and *felaweshipe*.

The associative dynamism of Chaucer's *General Prologue* is explained by comparison with the 1389 guild returns: drinking and praying were inseparable. Twentieth-century moral strictures on the blend of religion and food in Chaucer's *Prologue* are misplaced. But *The Knight's Tale* and its silencing of Hippolyta (compounded in its Elizabethan adaptation as *The Two Noble Kinsmen*) unpicks that 'collective determinism': Theseus rules without 'queenly counsel' and though not a tyrant, stands alone, refusing *felaweshipe*. Chaucer, meanwhile, that elvish

and reluctant participant, is not to remain solitary: his counterpart is not Shakespeare but Bottom the weaver, and his helpmeet is none other than Alison of Bath, another weaver, who seeks her sixth husband, even as Chaucer, following the authorial signature established by Ovid, Dante and Boccaccio, has introduced himself as the sixth of six in the *General Prologue*. If this impishness is really Chaucer's intention, he must have envisaged a similar personal fate to Socrates' (*Wife of Bath's Prologue* p.728ff) for his turdy rhyming. Chapter 5 explores the betrayal of the country by the towns in the fabliaux and Chaucer's alignment with country folk against their city-based friar, knight-rapist and summoner predators, in contrast to Florentine expulsion of outsiders, peasants – and magnates. The 'brotherhoods' of the towns are replaced by extended families in his English countryside, which is empowered in ways not present in Boccaccio nor in Tudor England. This chapter will perhaps mean less to American readers: a map of English counties would have helped place Holderness (a 'town in Yorkshire' in the *Riverside Chaucer*), and a map of medieval London and its wards and suburbs – and indeed one of northern Italy – is always a useful adjunct. It is a pity that the publishers did not run to these, especially since the many plates are so well integrated into the text.

Using the grid formed by horizontal associative dynamic and vertical authoritarianism, Wallace traverses Chaucer's work achronologically. This untraditional approach is effective because it disorients the reader and disengages his/her preconceptions. Unusually, *Melibee* is made central to reading Chaucer (Chapter 8), and Wallace poignantly recounts the political context of its source, Albertano of Brescia's *Liber Consolationis*. By and large the balance between the two projects, England and Italy, is well kept, though it has to be said that Boccaccio and Petrarch emerge as more full-bodied figures than Chaucer, whose self-disguise as the 'worm' in the garden of Love is never fully penetrated, largely because there is no explanatory private communication extant. We understand Chaucer through his public fiction whereas Petrarch's private fictions about himself can be laid open to scrutiny. Eloquence, Wallace demonstrates, is both declaration and concealment; Griselda-like silence and self-obliteration secure Chaucer's victory in the uncertainties of political and critical fame. The central project of counsel, and particularly wifely eloquence, is well demonstrated in the texts Wallace so expertly opens to historical scrutiny, but there are some where his own eloquence observes a discreet silence. What of *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, barely even mentioned here, where 'wommenes conseil is been ful ofte colde,' ('baleful'; *CT* VII, 3256)? Did it not fit this 'consultative reading' of the *Canterbury Tales*? This reader, doubtful of the universality of this premise of wifely counsel, where not all wives are skilled rhetoricians nor all husbands receptive listeners, wonders if the intrusive awakening voice in Chaucer's *House of Fame* had the status of a

wifely 'person from Porlock', depriving us of much visionary inspiration for Chaucer's pen.

The huge agenda of this work is made easier to grasp by headed sectional divisions within chapters, occasionally, as in the long first chapter, causing abrupt transitions. However, parts of this book were published in earlier versions elsewhere, and at times this is apparent in a certain repetitiveness: we are three times told that Petrarch only once wrote to a woman, and that this was Anne, third wife of Emperor Charles IV of Bohemia (wrongly identified on p. 274 as Queen Anne's mother rather than namesake; on p. 362 her mother is Elizabeth, his fourth wife).

There are very few misprints for a book this size: Lombardy (p. 407) is misspelled, as are Rubinstein, Hoskins and Askins (pp. 25, 418, 447, all appearing correctly in the bibliography; Rosemond (*recte!*) Tuve is misspelled in notes (p. 468) and bibliography) and there is a syntactical problem in the construction 'for he or she who' (pp. 221, 255); the presentation and checking are almost impeccable.

Again and again the reader is surprised by the aptness of the comparisons Wallace makes, or reminded of the familiar in a new context: of Walter de Brienne, duke of Athens, overthrown in 1343 for his despotic rule in Florence; of Petrarch's attitude to the very slaves whose labour maintained his lifestyle; of the fall of the Florentine government exactly one year after Richard II acceded to the English throne and while Chaucer was present in Lombardy; of Edward III and Gaunt's support of Florence against the Pope and archbishop Courtenay; that lawyers did business inside St Paul's, stationed against its pillars. There are some interesting suggestions: Chaucer could have found *Il Filostrato* in Lombardy rather than Tuscany (p. 52); Roger of Ware came from a fourteenth-century trouble spot and could have learned Flemish in a brothel (p. 167); Chaucer's self-naming in the *Man of Law's Prologue* may be Chaucer's association of that author's power with that of the law: five of his six fellow JPs were sergeants-at-law (p. 202). Wallace's command of Italian and Middle English, matched by his familiarity with the Italian and English historical moment, provides an important new perspective on Chaucer's work which will direct critics for a whole generation. This is essentially a book for teachers of Chaucer to mediate to their students; its size and complexity put it beyond the reach of undergraduate students, but no doubt it will inspire further, student-oriented books.

ROSAMUND ALLEN

THE BLACK DEATH IN ENGLAND. Edited by M. Ormrod and P. Lindley.
1996. Paul Watkins, Stamford, £11.95 (pbk)

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Several books published in the last few years have reflected the continuing fascination with the impact made by the epidemics of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries upon medieval society. One could, for instance, single out Rosemary Horrox's collection of sources, *The Black Death* (Manchester 1994), which has become an invaluable work of reference for both students and teachers alike. This volume, edited by Mark Ormrod and Phillip Lindley, is no less valuable for those wishing to engage with the lively debates that accompany this subject. It contains just four papers, introduced by P.J.P. Goldberg, which were first delivered to a Historical Association conference in 1992 and then expanded and re-written for inclusion here. All have much to say, all the more so since they start from the premise that the relationships between plague and change, whether social, economic or cultural, in late medieval England were not as straightforward as has sometimes been suggested. As Goldberg puts it, epidemic disease 'was not an autonomous agent of change' but one that often 'worked in tandem with other processes'. This volume does not seek to minimise the catastrophic impact of the pestilences on English society but to set them in a proper context. Christopher Harper-Bill, in his survey of English religion after the Black Death, emphasises from the beginning the cumulative effects of war, schism and economic decline upon the religious outlook of men and women in late fourteenth century Europe. The Black Death itself was a further setback for the self-confidence of western Christendom, one which was all the more real for those who witnessed the heavy toll of clergy and laity alike. In the longer term, however, the dramatic effect that the plagues had upon clergy numbers — with around 40 per cent falling victim to the first outbreak in 1348-49 — did not plunge the Church into an era of decline. Harper-Bill shows that clergy recruitment in fact gained momentum and that, despite the economic problems they faced, many monasteries were able to adapt to changing conditions by, for instance, leasing out most of their estates. When looking at the subject of lay piety, Harper-Bill demonstrates that many of the trends often assumed to have derived their popularity from the impact of the plagues were well-established by 1349. For instance, post-obit arrangements, such as chantries, were already popular devices to ensure the soul's speedy passage through purgatory, while the proliferation of lay fraternities was a movement with strong roots in the early fourteenth century. Likewise, the related emphasis upon conscience and contemplation in devotional texts was not itself a product of the devastation brought by the plagues. The effect of the Black Death was to intensify these pre-existing expressions of piety: purgatory, he argues, 'appears to have entered far more strongly into popular consciousness in its wake'. As Goldberg

points out in his introduction, however, such ideas could not be put into practice without the necessary financial resources. The plague-driven redistribution of wealth away from the landed aristocracy that took place in the later fourteenth century was reflected in an explosion of small-scale benefactions to parishes, guilds and almshouses made by merchants, artisans and even those who worked the land, for whom rising living standards provided the means to express both piety and social ambition.

Artistic patronage continued to provide a vital medium for the expression of piety, whether in parish churches or the largest abbeys and cathedrals. In his essay 'The Black Death and English Art. A Debate and Some Assumptions' Phillip Lindley provides a useful corrective to existing interpretations of the changes in artistic styles that took place over the course of the fourteenth century and into the fifteenth. The shift from the later Decorated to the Perpendicular style of architecture, for instance, has often been directly attributed to the impact of the plagues of the mid to late fourteenth century. Some have seen it as a more 'spiritual' form of architecture, in keeping with a greater awareness of human mortality, while others have blamed a deterioration in craftsmanship following the Black Death. On the other hand there are those, such as Joan Evans, who have sought to remove the plagues entirely from debates over artistic changes. Lindley looks closely at the available evidence for the impact of plague upon workshops and building projects in the late fourteenth century. He concludes that many projects, such as large-scale rebuilding of monastic churches, were indeed checked by the plague: the ambitious sculptural programme at Exeter cathedral was halted in 1348-49 and not renewed for another twenty-five years. The shortage of labour pushed up wages, and so although one can certainly view the shift to the Perpendicular style in purely aesthetic terms, Lindley points out that its adaptability, unencumbered as it was by the labour-intensive detail of Decorated mouldings, made it more attractive to customers affected by spiralling wages and lower rental incomes.

The subject of politics has received scant attention from historians of the Black Death, but in 'The Politics of Pestilence. Government in England after the Black Death' Mark Ormrod provides a welcome insight into the impact that the plagues had upon political and administrative structures. He demonstrates, for instance, that the fiscal issues that rose to the surface during the course of the revolt of 1381 represented a merging of contemporary concerns over the governance of the realm with the social dislocation experienced in the aftermath of the Black Death. He points in particular to the marginalisation of lesser landholders in the counties in the face of 'the drawing together of crown, nobility and county gentry in a community of economic and political interests'. The enforcement of the Ordinance and Statute of Labourers, for instance, shows the manner in which principles

associated with the implementation of emergency measures gradually evolved into permanent means by which the landed classes were able to enhance their political authority and economic dominance in the shires. In the long term, however, Ormrod shows that political discourse, whether at the centre or in the localities, was no longer affected to the same extent by plague, despite the continuing outbreaks. Even by the 1390s, for instance, public debate over Richard II's finances was conducted in more overtly 'constitutional' terms, concentrating upon the rights and wrongs of supporting the King in peace as well as in war rather than upon the poverty of his subjects.

Setting the scene for these three essays is the admirable treatment given by Jim Bolton to what is perhaps the most familiar of the themes dealt with in the volume. In "The World Upside Down". Plague as an Agent of Economic and Social Change', Bolton first surveys the historiographical background to a subject that has attracted the attentions of historians since the late nineteenth century before moving on to undertake a comprehensive and subtle analysis of the state of play in many of the related debates that have sprung up over the decades. Particularly striking is his use of regional studies, many of which have appeared in the last ten or fifteen years, but which have not so far been brought together effectively. These are used to great effect in his analysis of the continuing stagnation and even decline in the population level until the late fifteenth century, a phenomenon which, it is now generally accepted, cannot be explained purely in terms of mortality as revealed by patterns of 'national' and 'local' outbreaks themselves. He then considers other factors, notably the effect that later marriage and decreasing fertility may also have had upon the population as many women chose to postpone marriage in favour of the new economic opportunities available for them in urban centres such as York. Moving on to the social and economic consequences of these demographic changes, Bolton once again draws upon a wealth of local studies. Whether discussing the fortunes of the towns, or those of the gentry and peasantry, Bolton presents a pragmatic and well-argued dissection of the debates, teasing out where possible, from a mass of evidence, the relationship of plague to the changes he discusses. Most prominent in his article is a recognition both of the diversity of the experiences of many of the English regions (as seen in studies of Essex and Sussex in this period) and of the extent to which some changes were truly structural and permanent, while others were more temporary in character. When looking at the roles played by women in the fifteenth century, for instance, the durability of the North-West European marriage pattern (life-cycle servanthood, later marriage and fewer children) into the early-modern period is contrasted with the temporary advances made by women in the economy as a whole before, as in the case of York, women were once more being excluded from many occupations.

Overall this volume succeeds admirably in eschewing a 'broad brush'

approach to the impact of plague in later medieval England. The integration of significant recent research into long-standing debates is one of its many strengths, as is a recognition of the diversity and importance of local experience in future research. As Bolton puts it, 'notions of general prosperity or decline should be abandoned in favour of much more subtle pictures of varying fortunes and of changes that were to benefit some and disadvantage others'. He and his fellow authors have produced an important set of studies that should attract both students of this period and those actively engaged in research into the issues that are addressed here so effectively.

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Daniel Williams, 'The hastily drawn up will of William Catesby Esquire, 25 August 1485', *Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society Transactions*, vol. 51 (1975-6), p. 48.

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