

# REVIEW

## Hoccleve's "Learn to Die," Resurrected?

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David Watt

*The Making of Thomas Hoccleve's "Series"*

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☞ FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE has until recent decades suffered relative neglect. Squeezed between the rich poetry of the late fourteenth century—evident in the output of Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, John Gower, and the *Pearl*-poet, for instance—and the vibrant literary activity of sixteenth-century Reformation England, fifteenth-century English writing has lived in the shadows cast by these adjacent, more eventful periods. In recent years, however, the literature of this era has found new advocates. David Lawton's influential 1987 essay suggested that the apparent "dullness" of this post-Chaucerian period was in fact an ironic conceit writers cultivated in order to avoid unwanted attention from political and ecclesiastical authorities. Nicholas Watson's seminal 1995 article concerning the influence of Archbishop Arundel's Constitutions of 1409 on what Watson terms the "vernacular theology" of the time has also shaped modern critical approaches to this period. However, it would be unfair to conclude that dullness and oppressive legislation wholly characterize fifteenth-century writing, and Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh's enormous collection of essays, published in 2011, has sought to reassess the influence of Arundel on the literature and culture of this period.<sup>1</sup>

1. David Lawton, "Dullness and the Fifteenth Century," *ELH* 54, no. 4 (1987): 761–99; Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409," *Speculum* 70, no. 4 (1995): 822–64; *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh (Turnhout, Belgium, 2011).

Thomas Hoccleve, a poet and bureaucrat who worked at the Privy Seal office in Westminster in the early decades of the century, has been one of the greatest beneficiaries of this reassessment. His heavily autobiographical narratives have been evaluated for what they disclose about the political and religious pressures of the period, and about the personal anxieties, health issues, and almost constant penury that seem to have plagued Thomas, Hoccleve's literary persona. Hoccleve's late-career work, the *Series*, has received much critical attention for its account of Thomas's mental illness, which occurred sometime between the completion of the *Regement of Princes* in 1411–12 and about 1419, when he started work on parts of the *Series*. Arguably, Hoccleve's intensely personal narrative has led to critical emphasis on the opening "Complaint" and "Dialogue" sections, while the remaining parts of the work—two translations from the *Gesta Romanorum*, a translation of part of Henry Suso's *Horologium sapientiae*, and a sermon for All Saints' Day—have drawn less attention. The text's piecemeal structure has proved challenging for scholars. But evidently there was method in Hoccleve's madness, so to speak, when he compiled this particular series of poems and joined them to an autobiographical "Complaint" and "Dialogue." Consequently, the critical tendency to focus on the first two sections of the *Series* calls for a more inclusive study of this idiosyncratic work.

David Watt's book offers a refreshingly different approach to the poem. Eschewing the debate concerning Hoccleve's personal and financial health, Watt instead analyzes the text's internal, self-conscious tale of its own construction, which he reads for its contribution to what we know of book and manuscript production in early fifteenth-century England. As a professional scribe, Hoccleve would have been familiar with the challenges of making manuscripts and books, especially in a post-Arundel climate still under Lollardy's seditious threat. The frame narrative of the *Series* sees Thomas and his Friend discuss what texts to include or omit from the literary creation that takes shape before the reader's eyes. "Learn to Die" is the key text in Watt's reading of the *Series*. For Watt, the action of the narrative pivots on Thomas's intention to translate all four books of Suso's *ars moriendi* treatise and his subsequent change of mind. Ending instead at the first book results in a work that is different from the one he set out to make. And this is Watt's recurring message—that the *Series* is the story of Thomas making a book he did *not* set out to make.

Watt adopts a Hocclevean beginning for his own study: "This is not the book I initially planned to write" (1), but this belies his attention to detail and structure in this book. Each chapter considers an aspect of the *Series* alongside another manuscript containing Hoccleve's writings—the two Huntington Library holographs, the Durham University Library autograph of the *Series*, Hoccleve's formulary, and finally a scribal copy of the *Series* in the Bodleian Library. Reading the *Series* by dipping into and out of these related manuscripts yields insights into the compilation of manuscripts and books, questions of readership, and the purposes of such productions.

The events in the *Series* occur against a background of ecclesiastical reform, and Watt highlights the significance of the date of Thomas's recovery: November 1, 1414,

saw Emperor Sigismund open the Council of Konstanz, which was convened to end the schism in the Church by replacing three popes with one. It was also intended to combat heresies espoused by the followers of heterodox theologians such as John Wyclif and Jan Hus. Indeed, 1415 saw the condemnation and burning of Wyclif's writings and the burning of Hus himself at Konstanz. For Watt, this nexus of writing, religion, and reform shapes Thomas's production of the *Series*: "Thomas's affliction is not simply a conventional metaphor for 'the state of sin' but a metaphor for the state of affairs during the conciliar period" (10).

In the first chapter, Watt considers both the internal and external audiences for the *Series*. He compares the audiences in and for the *Series* with the various audiences disclosed by the poetry in the Huntington Library manuscript HM 111, one of the two autograph editions of Hocckleve's poetry held there. Thomas's Privy Seal colleagues constitute the audience in the "Complaint." Like the Friend who calls to the recovered narrator, they would have been familiar with the reading, lending, and copying of manuscripts that Thomas recounts. Watt complements this comparison with references to Hocckleve's occupational anxieties in *La Male Regle* and a ballade to Henry Somer, recorded in HM 111. Like those for the *Series*, HM 111's audiences vary—from Hocckleve's colleagues in the clerkly profession to influential patrons such as the well-connected Lady Hereford, who was sister of Archbishop Arundel and grandmother of Henry V. The "Complaint" identifies Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, as its audience, but Watt usefully amplifies this by considering the intended audience for the whole book.

The second chapter describes the structure of the *Series* alongside another Huntington Library manuscript, HM 744. Watt uncovers the latter's interesting (and, to date, overlooked) history. Catchwords, transitions from one quire to the next, small variations in quire size, and soiling on outer bifolia provide evidence that Hocckleve's material in HM 744 once circulated in the form of three booklets before being bound with other devotional writings to produce the manuscript we have today. Booklets allowed scribes to counter the constraints of time and the limited availability of exemplars, a challenge when they were producing more complex, continuous manuscript books. As Watt observes of turning booklets into books: "When used effectively, their boundaries are difficult to discern. They therefore offer compilers the flexibility to delay decisions about including texts until the very last minute" (75). "Learn to Die" comprises one of the three surviving booklets belonging to Hocckleve in HM 744. This brings Watt to the *Series*, in which the narrator's plan is to translate "Learn to Die," and the other poems are added at the last minute, suggested by the Friend. Watt sees the influence of booklet production in the frame narrative's tale of its own construction. The initial absence, and later inclusion, of the moralization of the first *Gesta* tale offers further evidence of Thomas's reliance on the booklet "industry" to make his book.

In the third chapter, Watt draws on the surviving autograph edition of the *Series*, MS Cosin V.iii.9 in Durham University Library, to consider the various "ends" of the work. The centrality of "Learn to Die" to Watt's reading is particularly evident here.

Suso's *Horologium sapientiae* was what Thomas initially intended to translate, yet the final product evidently looks quite different. For Watt, the moment toward the end of "Learn to Die" when Thomas recounts "þat labour Y forsook" due to his "smaal konnyng" (lines 920, 924) is the key to the work, "the point of greatest tension and acts as a turning point for the plot" (103). The chapter does draw some interesting parallels between Thomas's decision to stop translating Suso's treatise, lest he stray into potentially heretical matter, and Hoccleve's earlier appeal to Sir John Oldcastle in HM 111 to step back from the brink of heresy, to reform, and to seek mercy. In that poem, Hoccleve criticizes Oldcastle's poor reading habits as a contributing factor in his downfall. Watt finds similar resonances with the Old Man's suspicion that the thought-filled, troubled disposition of Thomas in the *Regement of Princes* may be a sign of heterodox beliefs.

Each of these scenes exposes the possible dangers, to oneself and others, associated with thinking, reading, and writing to excess. Amid this compelling intertextual back-and-forth, however, Watt sometimes loses sight of MS Cosin V.iii.9, which he describes as the chief source of complementary and contrasting readings: the key link seems to be in the manuscript's envoi to Lady Westmorland (thus the physical "end" rather than the internal "end" marked by "Learn to Die"). As niece of Geoffrey Chaucer and aunt of Henry V, she serves a "legitimizing function" (130) as recipient of the *Series*, attesting to Thomas's successful personal and social rehabilitation, made possible by his decision to cease translating "Learn to Die." Unlike Oldcastle, Thomas knew when to stop.

Hoccleve's late-career formulary is the fourth autograph manuscript against which Watt reads the *Series*. To date, the formulary has received little critical attention due to its ostensible lack of literary value. However, for Watt the *Series* functions as an "information technology" much like the formulary "in that it provides its maker and its readers with access to exemplary texts in an organized manner" (185). The formulary contains two items of correspondence between King Henry V and Emperor Sigismund, which Watt considers before moving on to suggestive allegorical readings of the *Gesta* narratives in the context of the events at Konstanz.

The final chapter moves away from Hoccleve's own handwritten manuscripts to a copy of the *Series* in the Bodleian Library, MS Selden Supra 53. As the most authoritative non-autograph edition of the *Series*, it offers insights into how fifteenth-century scribes and readers approached the work. The centrality of "Learn to Die" to Watt's argument continues apparent, as the poem in this manuscript features a miniature of a dying man with a proliferation of marginal comments surrounding it, suggesting that readers were prompted to respond to the devotional content at this point. Watt situates this copy in the context of the Selden scribe's other known productions, including Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes* and Lydgate's *Troy Book*, *Siege of Thebes*, *Siege of Jerusalem*, and *Danse Macabre*. He views them as evidence of an early fifteenth-century interest in exemplary and "mirror" literature. Thus readers approached the *Series* "as a collection of mirrors" (186) that served as a textual means of personal formation and reformation.

Watt's references to sources have the kind of thoroughness one might expect of a dissertation even more than a monograph. The impression of rigor is unfortunately undercut by a few typographical errors. The block of indented text at the top of page 29 is actually a continuation of the paragraph. Figure 4 is misattributed to the Huntington Library, both on p. 56 and in the list of illustrations (the Huntington is the source of many of the book's useful illustrations). Durham University Library is the source of figure 4 as well as figure 8, an image taken from the same manuscript.

Watt's claim that "Learn to Die" is the pivotal section of the *Series* seems tenuous at times. While it is innovative and provocative to see the balance of critical attention shifted away from the "Complaint" and "Dialogue," the Suso translation and *Gesta* narratives arguably gain their meaning within the *Series* from the way in which they resonate with these earlier exchanges between Thomas and his Friend. Yet the pull of Thomas's intense opening narratives is hard to resist, and Watt offers a meticulously argued case for the centrality of "Learn to Die." A codicological study as much as a literary one, *The Making of Thomas Hocckleve's Series* offers a refreshing and much-needed contrast to the usual critical approaches to the *Series*, which tend to concern themselves with Thomas's financial worries, politics, and mental health.

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