

Book Reviews

Pre-1800

JOANNA BELLIS. *The Hundred Years War in Literature, 1337–1600*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2016. Pp. 300. \$99.00 (cloth).
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The dates in the title are the only clues to the impressive scope of Joanna Bellis's study, *The Hundred Years War in Literature, 1337–1600*, about the influence of the Hundred Years War on English language and literature. Although Philippe VI's confiscation of Edward III's French lands in 1337 marks the beginning of this conflict, the traditional date for its end is the defeat and death of John Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, in the Battle of Castillon in 1453. Bellis, however, is not examining the war as a historical event but rather scrutinizing its significance as an impetus for English linguistic and national identity for almost three hundred years under three different dynasties. Moreover, although she includes the word *literature* in her title, Bellis is not referring to the narrow concept of canonical works but rather a broader notion of textuality that includes propagandistic chronicles and ballads as well as the poetry of Chaucer and the history plays of Shakespeare. Bellis should thus be commended for bridging the divides between the medieval and early modern periods and between historical and literary studies. In the process, she introduces readers to neglected texts that fall between the cracks of periodization and disciplinary boundaries but deserve more extended analysis.

Bellis organizes the book's five chapters both chronologically and recursively in a structure she calls "kaleidoscopic" (5). Although the chapters push forward from 1066 to 1600, three subtitled topics are addressed intermittently to emphasize recurring issues: the Norman myth, writing history, and the problem of Chaucer. This unique organizational structure of the study helps the reader to appreciate the continuity amid change in the long shadow cast over the language and literature of England by the Hundred Years War.

In chapter 1 Bellis introduces the polemics that called into question England's multilingual vernacularity during the fourteenth century. Ironically, as the English king was pressing his birthright to the French throne, proponents of war with France increasingly expressed

outrage at the alleged linguistic invasion of the Norman Conquest that purportedly overwrote the mother tongue. As Bellis demonstrates, though, this metaphor of the word as sword was a politically motivated strategy rather than an accurate description of the late-medieval relationship of English and French. Although in chapter 3 Bellis moves chronologically forward to the sixteenth century, she picks up this thread of the Norman myth in another context by showing how the Inkhorn Controversy reiterated many of the same allegations that a foreign language invaded the native English; however, the enemy was not French, but the classical languages promoted by the humanists.

In chapter 2 Bellis examines the chronicles of the Hundred Years War not as sources of information about contemporary events but as rhetorically self-conscious constructions of history. In contrast to the plain-spoken English, the French and their language were attacked as deceitful and duplicitous. Bellis identifies a specialized vocabulary that the chroniclers developed in this surrogate campaign in which, as she often repeats, words are a metaphor for swords. Bellis follows this thread of writing history in subsequent chapters: In chapter 4, she contrasts the increasingly academic and antiquarian history written by individual authors in the sixteenth century with the propaganda of the collectively composed medieval chronicles. Nonetheless, the linguistic battles of the Inkhorn Controversy ultimately led to a suspicion of mimetic language itself as the assumption about the essential connection between words and things eroded. In chapter 5 Bellis argues that this disruption of the relationship between signifier and signified culminates in Shakespeare's deconstruction of the mimetic illusion of theatrical performance in his history plays about the Hundred Years War during the 1590s.

Bellis turns her attention to medieval poetry, both popular and canonical, in chapter 3. The texts studied in this chapter range from jingoist ballads and carols, poetry that makes war with words, to John Page's moving eyewitness account of the suffering of the people of Rouen under siege by Henry V. Bellis addresses the paradoxes of Chaucer's reputation as the father of English poetry despite his frenchified idiom as well as John Lydgate's reversal of martial to marital language and assertion of English and French unity under the Lancastrians, who, in fact, had no legitimate claim to France having deposed the last Plantagenet, Richard II. In chapter 4 Bellis briefly returns to the problem of Chaucer to comment on the celebration, in the context of the Inkhorn Controversy, of his pure English and the usurpation of his service to the Plantagenet kings in the frontispiece of Thomas Speght's 1598 edition of the genealogical regalia of the Lancastrians and Tudors.

In chapter 5 Bellis provides a spectacular conclusion to her argument by demonstrating the centrality of the Hundred Years War to Shakespeare's questioning of linguistic and theatrical mimesis as well as dynastic and militaristic propaganda in his history plays of the 1590s. She provides persuasive interpretations not only of the individual plays but also of the intertextuality and foreshadowing enabled by the reverse chronological order in which Shakespeare wrote the plays, starting with his collaboration on *Edward III* and his composition of the three parts of *Henry VI* early in the decade and ending c. 1599 with the pinnacle of English success under *Henry V* while revisiting the Lancastrian usurpation in *Richard II* in mid-decade. Bellis's close reading of the English king's wooing of the French princess in the final scene of *Henry V* persuasively completes her argument about words as a metaphor for swords as she reveals how Henry articulates conquest as courtship despite Katherine's resistance to her role as a spoil of war.

In *The Hundred Years War in Literature, 1337–1600* Bellis very successfully addresses a broad audience of literary scholars and historians, medievalists and early modernists. Its kaleidoscopic organization and elegant style render its complex analysis of the *longue durée* of the Hundred Years War in England clear and persuasive.

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