

Review

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The Serpent of Division, by John Lydgate. Edited with Introduction, Notes, and a Glossary by H. N. MACCRACKEN. Oxford: University Press. 1911. 4to. 75 pp.

Dr MacCracken's edition of Lydgate's *Serpent of Division* is a careful and scholarly piece of work which has the merit of having rendered accessible to students of English an interesting prose work of the early fifteenth century, 'the only well-authenticated prose work,' in fact, which came from the pen of Lydgate. The text has a further interest in that it contains the most extensive treatment of Julius Caesar in the whole range of Middle English literature; and while its popularity as a political tract seems to have lasted well on into the sixteenth century, if we are to judge from the printed fragments still extant, its theme, the dangers of national division, was frequently repeated at a later date and appears for instance in the early play of *Gorboduc*. No great artistic merits can perhaps be claimed for the tract; its prose style is no better and no worse than that of the average fifteenth century production. On the other hand Lydgate's material is of considerable interest. It is drawn from various sources with judgment and care, and the editor in tracking his author through the ample medieval chronicles has supplied an interesting as well as a useful commentary upon medieval methods of work. In short the editorial labours leave little to be desired. The best work is perhaps done in the careful elucidation of these sources: but the text, notes and glossary are all good, clear and concise (there is apparently a misprint of *wrowt* for *wrowzt* on p. 53, l. 1); and the edition is made attractive in another sense, by the inclusion of three very choice full-page reproductions of contemporary MS. pictures taken from the Yates Thomson MS. of *Li Fait des Romains*.

There is one matter however, and that a rather important one, where the editor appears to be at fault, namely, in the date which he assigns to the composition of the work. All four MSS. belong to the second half of the fifteenth century but at the end of the text in the Calthorpe MS. there is the following significant statement: 'The forseide division so to schewe I have remembred this forseid littil translacion. The moneth of Decembre, the ffirste yere of oure soveraigne lord that now ys king henry the vj^{te}.' And, then again, in the colophon of the same MS. (Calthorpe) the date 1400 is found. So that there seem to be two possible dates: the year 1422 (i.e. the first year of the reign of Henry VI) and secondly, the date 1400; and it is the later of these dates upon which Dr MacCracken has fixed, in spite of the awkward evidence of the colophon.

In the first place he rightly rejects the idea of reading Henry IV instead of Henry VI in the passage already quoted. This change would not clear the matter up, while it would imply not only a conceivable scribal slip (the numeral IV having been read as VI), but also a substitution of the abbreviation *-te* for the *-be* which would have appeared with IV^{be}. But when he proceeds to dismiss the possibility

of the date 1400 on the ground that Chaucer is referred to as 'some one long dead' his argument is scarcely in keeping with the facts. Chaucer is mentioned (p. 65) as one 'þat was flowre of poetis...þe firste þat euer enluminede owre langage,...my maistere Chaucere which compendiously wrote þe deþe of þis mizte Emperour.' This description does not necessarily refer to one 'long dead.' It is quite conceivable that Lydgate writing in 1400 would speak in similar terms of his master who had died in the December of the preceding year (1399).

Nor is the evidence of the colophon contradicted by the interesting fact which Dr MacCracken brings forward for that purpose, namely, that at the end of the *Story of Thebes* we find Lydgate developing a train of thought similar to that of the *Serpent of Division* and developing it moreover in language closely parallel. The *Story* was completed somewhere between the years 1421 and 1425, and it certainly seems possible that in this passage Lydgate may have been making use of an earlier work of his, the *Serpent of Division* for instance, supposing it to have been written in 1400. And even supposing its date of composition to have been 1422, the *Story* may, notwithstanding, have been the work indebted, for, as has already been stated, the *Story* was not certainly completed until 1425.

On the other hand things become rather more plain if we accept the date (1400) given by the colophon as the year of composition. Then in the year 1422, a year of political unrest owing to the death of Henry V, it may well have been that the time seemed to Lydgate to call for the reappearance of a political tract which contained such seasonable counsel as the *Serpent of Division*, and that he was therefore induced to reproduce that earlier work of his. Supposing that revision to have been made in 1422, it would account for the interesting parallel already mentioned in the *Story of Thebes*; the thought and the diction of the prose pamphlet would be fresh in Lydgate's memory when he proceeded with the completion of that poem. But some such revision seems to have been actually made. As Dr MacCracken himself states, one particular MS. (the Calthorpe) shows modernising tendencies, a statement that is readily corroborated by a reference to the variant readings contained in the footnotes of his edition. The text of that particular MS., moreover, ends with the quotation 'I have remembred this forseid littil translacion'; a statement which in its very wording seems to imply some such process of revision. And lastly it is at the end of this passage, which is peculiar to the Calthorpe MS., that the year 1422 is substantially quoted; a date which must therefore be regarded as the date of a reproduction, while to the year 1400 must be assigned the original composition of the work.

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