

Public Abstract

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This dissertation employs an eclectic approach to illuminate the role of the begging poem in medieval English literature. Examples are drawn from Anglo-Saxon poetry ("Widsith" and "Deor") as well as Middle English poetry (Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse," Lydgate's "Letter to Gloucester," and four poems by Thomas Hoccleve. Since poems that beg are a social, transactional phenomenon as well as a literary one, a narrative can be constructed that illustrates how begging poems came to be written as well as their relative success or failure, which can, in some cases, be illustrated by documentary evidence. As each case is examined, the circumstances under which the poets lived and wrote are delineated, as well as their relationships with their respective patrons; these details are sometimes a matter of speculation and sometimes documented in medieval and historical sources. In the case of the Anglo-Saxon poems, for instance, most details must be speculated upon; in the case of Hoccleve, historical sources are available which provide insights into the motivation for writing the poems in the first place, as well as their success. Finally, the poems are dissected with an eye to their poetic strategies.