



1993

**Review Essay: Kugel, James L., ed. *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition***

Janine Marie Idziak  
Loras College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Renaissance Studies Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Idziak, Janine Marie (1993) "Review Essay: Kugel, James L., ed. *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*," *Quidditas*: Vol. 14 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol14/iss1/16>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quidditas by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

of alchemy. The secular truths of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale (that alchemy involves materialism and is evil) contrast with the spiritual truths of the Second Nun's Tale.

Hill concludes that fiction does tell truth; some of the truths come from old books, but comedy, common sense, and experience also reveal truth. The truth in fiction, however, is usually mixed with falsehood. The pairing or grouping of tales, which may compete against or even contradict others, is an attempt to arrive at some broader truth, which a single tale cannot provide. Hill's first three introductory chapters provide a useful overview of past criticism. He can be faulted for too much retelling of plots, and some readers will complain that he neglected some pilgrims whose tales invite a discussion of truth — the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, the Merchant, and the Clerk, for example.

Though the problem of truth, especially the multiplicity of truths, has been discussed by a number of scholars, these two books explore the topic in more comprehensive ways than does earlier criticism; their bibliographies and notes are copious and comprehensive.

Katharine S. Gittes

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

Kugel, James L., ed. *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y. 1990. 251 pp. \$13.95.

*Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition* contains papers from a conference 'Poetry and Prophecy' held at Harvard University in 1986. While focusing on individual works or questions within particular fields, contributing scholars were asked to address a set of larger, common questions: 'To what extent were poetry and prophecy felt to be fundamentally similar activities, perhaps even identified with each other? What sorts of similarities were conceived to exist between the two, and how were these explained? How was poetic inspiration viewed in the light of prophecy, and what effect did the existence of prophecy have on the poet's self-presentation?' (p 2). The anthology coming out of this conference is interdisciplinary in perspective with contributions by professors of biblical studies and English, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Arabic language and literature. The book is historically focused and chronologically organized, beginning with Old Testament literature and ending with the Renaissance.

The anthology includes three papers specifically on poetry and prophecy in the Middle Ages, namely 'The Meaning of *Mutanabbi*', 'The Poet as Prophet in Medieval Hebrew Literature' and 'The Nature of Prophecy in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*'. These essays represent the Arabic, Jewish, and Christian traditions respectively. Medieval studies tend to focus on the Christian tradition, and this anthology is commendable for its religious and cultural breadth. Discussion of a medieval Jewish view of prophecy as belonging to the faculty of imagination is also tucked away in an essay ostensibly on Old Testament prophecy — 'Imagining Prophecy'.

The book's subtitle, *The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, might lead potential readers to expect essays giving careful analyses of literary texts, and this

is certainly present. Indeed, there may well be a tendency to review this book from the perspective of literary scholarship, but it should not be regarded as of interest only to literary scholars. *Prophecy* is essentially a *religious* phenomenon, and these essays can also serve as springboards for exploration of topics in medieval theology. For example, medieval stories describing the figure Merlin as a prophet raise the theological issue of how to distinguish true from false prophets since Merlin's personal life and prophecies do not fit the mold of the biblical prophets. Indeed, five systematic commentaries assessing Merlin's alleged prophetic status had been written by the end of the twelfth century (pp 159–60). Or again, the appropriation of biblical descriptions of Old Testament prophets by medieval Hebrew poets to describe their own work (pp 145–9) says something about medieval views on the thorny theological problem of the proper use and interpretation of biblical texts.

Contained in this anthology is one essay nominally devoted to the Renaissance period — 'After the Middle Ages: Prophetic Authority and Human Fallibility in Renaissance Epic'. Its content, however, is disappointingly thin with respect to the theme of the relationship between poetry and prophecy.

The highly specialized and technical character of the selections makes this book appropriate for use by graduate students as well as by scholars. Extensive notes that can serve as a bibliographic resource for further study and research are appended.

Janine Marie Idziak  
Loras College

Lerer, Seth. *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1991. xii + 268 pp. \$35.00.

*Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature* reviews itself. After a long warm-up on the methodology to be used, the author repeatedly reminds the reader of what he has just said, what he is saying, what he will say next, and how all will fit into his full argument, which is restated once more in the conclusion: 'The theme of this book has been that writing is a social practice and a cultural mythology in Anglo-Saxon England and that Old English poetry and Anglo-Latin history draw on both to represent the past to their readers' (p 195). Evidence for this view, however, seems narrow: 'Scenes of reading and writing [that is, where 'literacy' itself is discussed or central to the action] are the loci for that representation, as the past of myth or history or Scripture is invoked in cryptic texts and their heroic or scholarly interpretation. In Hrothgar's moment with the hilt, Daniel's beholding of the text, the student's decipherment of the riddle, or in Bede's and Asser's notions of a charm or manuscript initial lie the venues for reflections on the self, society, and the created world' (p 195). One feels that Lerer is not writing his book, but writing about the book he planned to write. The formidable romanticism of the oral-formulaic school may account for this rhetorical caution and a style marked by politic editorial timidity.

Lerer's thesis, however, that much if not most Old English literature is literate, not oral, though hardly new, is undeniably correct, as the much better case