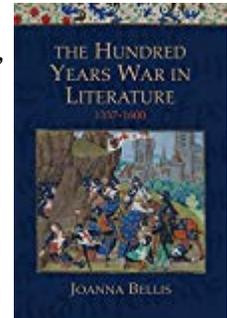


Joanna Bellis. *The Hundred Years War in Literature, 1337-1600.* Rochester: D. S. Brewer, 2016. 296 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84384-428-0.



Reviewed by Brian R. Price (Air University, Air Command and Staff College)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Joanna Bellis has penned an enduring contribution to our knowledge of the Hundred Years' War. In *The Hundred Years War in Literature, 1337-1600*, she both studies and opines the resonating effect of the war through literary evidence in the English language. Bellis shows how the war shaped aspects of Middle English and how English in turn shaped perceptions of the war, crystallizing with a sense of nationalism. The paradox of national myth, she writes, forms “the inescapable self-defeating paradox of war writing: we need to seek pathos in chaos, and shroud the unspeakable and the monstrous in the dignity and honour of remembrance. Yet to do so is to be drawn into the wider orbit of the machinery of war, to partake of the rhetoric of heroism that clings to protest and dissent, as much as in another form it clings to sacrifice and glory” (p. 253).

Through a study of the war literature and its representation in art through poetry and drama, during and in the two centuries following, Bellis traces the influence of the war and language, myth, and a sense of national identity on the Eng-

lish side. From the perspective of literary criticism, she emphasizes the formative influence of language in the assembly of memory and identity. As a philological study, Bellis's study reveals a close reading of a wide range of surviving texts, a testament to her passion and thoroughness. As she puts it, her aim in writing the book was to “trace the conjunction between language and war in this single conflict, from the first chroniclers and poets to the playwrights who put it on the stage; from the performative linguistic mimesis in contemporary narratives to its literal performance” (p. 251).

By way of introduction, she takes traditional historiography on the war to task, seeking to “deconstruct the periodisation that has emphasized the break between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,” following work by James Simpson, Helen Cooper, and Daniel Wakelin (p. 2). Accordingly, she emphasizes continuity over change and evolution over revolution, preferring to take a long (three-century) view of this important era in English history. Anchored in the literary perspective, her book aims to “take down the fences” between the stud-

ies of history and literature, taking on the herculean task of examining how history was written and preserved from the dawn of the fourteenth century to the close of the sixteenth.

The book is broadly divided into two parts, one looking at contemporary literature expressed chiefly through chronicle and poetry, the second focusing on drama. In both cases, she sees within the language a performative character, and a formative one: “From its inception, English historiography was predicated on language, and specifically on etymology” (p. 13). Bellis writes beautifully: “Writing in a genre to which language and etymology had been crucial from its inception, historians were rehearsing a way that had already happened *in* language; and consequently they made their own language mimetic, self-consciously and politically performative” (p. 67).

In common with me, Bellis sees the war as crystallizing a sense of nationalism between the combatants, sometimes usually associated more with the early modern period. She writes of the language representing the war, “the way in which that shaped the directions in which it would burgeon, as national myth, for two centuries afterwards” (p. 251). The war’s resonance, “the investment of history in language,” created a symbiotic relationship between language, culture, and politics.

Bellis’s interpretation is not the nationalism of traditional narratives but a profoundly revisionist view. “The Hundred Years War did indeed stimulate a manifestation of medieval nationalism, but it was a very different kind of nationalism from one that once posited ... ‘triumphalist’ narratives: one predicated not on triumph, but fear; not on unity, but fragmentation; not on pugnacious confidence, but inferiority and anxiety” (p. 49). It is a profoundly dark reading of the rise of nationalism, one that emphasizes the “glass half empty” perspective, in contrast to the “glass half full” Whig interpretation. A corrective is certainly in order, but one might wonder whether Bellis’s view is truly reflective of the spirit of the times or whether she is

telling us more about our own age and our own fears about the force and influence of nationalism. This is not unique to the author; indeed, it is reflective of the academic tendency in our own era.

This school of analysis, as Bellis quotes Scott D. Troyan, seeks to avoid an approach that “divorces content from style ... focus[ing] our attentions on *what* was said, rather than on *how* it is said” (p. 81). This emphasis encourages readers to look between the lines, which is important but also fraught with risk from confirmation bias. It is good that this approach is so well articulated by Bellis, as applied to the body of chronicle and poetic literature of the era, and her philological expertise is clearly evident, but the critical reader could equally ask, “would a reader of the time approach the text this way, and would these subtle messages be received?” Bellis does not argue that this was necessarily intentional; she accedes that it could have been “received unconsciously,” but “some of them did so self-consciously and aggressively” (p. 81).

To me, it seems that this is a difficult thing to prove, and the author strays from the more solid ground established through her knowledge of the texts when trying to ascribe intent to the authors—this is part of the traditional demarcation that exists between literary criticism and history; historians are much less likely to accept these less tangible forms of evidence. As a result, Bellis’s arguments will likely resonate much more within the literary community than in the historical one. Still, she makes a host of interesting points and stimulates the examination of new perspectives, always welcome in historical analysis.

Fortunately, there is a great deal more in the work than this methodological approach. Bellis is superb at identifying political language from a legion of well-known chronicle and much less well-known political poetry. She does yeoman’s service in her chapter on chronicle—drawing the reader’s attention to subtle aspects of language and parallels in French that would likely escape a less focused reader—and poetry, where even the exis-

tence of these poems is not well known by historians.

Leaving the fifteenth century, she then turns to the sixteenth, where in two chapters she examines, in turn, how history was written and how it was performed on stage, displaying an unusual breadth of expertise. Her case concerning authorial intent is here supported more directly within the text, and her thesis remains, “the linguistic registers of English functioned hierarchically and combatively” (p. 206). The author illuminates well the struggle between the medieval and the humanist, noting the critical transition from medieval histories as “conceptualized as anonymous and collective texts, and added to by many hands, [to] sixteenth century chronicles ... authored by named individuals. They had endings, as well as beginnings” (p. 194). Through the chapter she examines, in turn, the problem of the “Norman myth,” the “problem of Chaucer,” the “politisisation of certain loan-words,” and the “development of generic idioms,” all showing a sixteenth-century shift from medieval practice (p. 193).

In her final chapter, Bellis artfully draws performance art with literature, examining the performance of history on William Shakespeare’s stage. Appropriately, she ends with more of her beautiful composition, which summarizes perhaps better than her format thesis the nature of her findings: “Like language, the playhouse is a place of convincing likeness masking essential difference. Language becomes an object of scrutiny in Shakespeare’s histories because it was (and always is) their analogue: just as the historiographical account must acknowledge that its original is lost, and that its attempt to represent in fact effaces and replaces it, so every word circles around its referent in the knowledge that it has only an arbitrary claim to encode it. The irony of theatrical and linguistic mimesis is that it silently destroyed its object” (p. 250).

Bellis’s study offers the reader a deeply informed and deeply critical read of historiographi-

cal writing as represented in chronicle, poetry, and the theater, in the process seeking to alert historians to the deep veins of social and political consciousness running just beneath the surface of otherwise well-known texts, and calling for caution and a degree of reevaluation for what we think we know about key sources and expressions from and about the Hundred Years’ War. She has made a powerful, enduring contribution, and a welcome one.

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