
The stated aim of the Middle English Texts series, the first volume of which appeared in 1975, is to publish ‘shorter Middle English texts that have not previously been edited or where existing editions can be improved upon, and parts of longer texts where a complete edition is not likely to appear in the foreseeable future’, including ‘religious prose, historical writing, and scientific and medical texts’ (see the series website: https://www.winterverlag.de/en/programm/buchreihen/anglistik_amerikanistik/reihe69/Middle_Engl_Texts/alle/). Previous volumes have included Scott-Macnab’s 2009 edition of William Twiti’s ‘The Art of Hunting’, Christian Heimerl’s 2008 *The Middle English Version of William of Saliceto’s ‘Anatomia’*, Una O’Farrel-Tate’s *The Abridged English Metrical Brut* (2002) and Richard Hamer’s *Three Lives from the Gilte Legende* (1978). In fact, this series has provided a home to a whole collection of what might be seen as awkward little texts — vernacular texts of interest that do not obviously meet the criteria of other series, perhaps because they are too hard to classify, or too short, or eclipsed by better-known works. Carrie Griffin’s edition of the *Wise Book of Philosophy and Astronomy* is a welcome addition to the series. It is also the first full-scale edition of the text to be published; the *Wise Book* was previously printed in the anthology *The World of Piers Plowman* (ed. Krochalis and Peters, 1975), but with minimal scholarly apparatus.

As Griffin points out in her introduction, where she lists thirty-four MSS, the majority of the fifteenth century (xii and xv—xxxvi), the *Wise Book* was a popular and widely circulated text. However, it has not attracted much scholarly attention, partly because it is hard to categorize: ‘the *Wise Book* resists classification strictly as a scientific
work, incorporating both “experimentally sound” activities such as astronomy and computation, “pseudo-science”, such as astrology, physiognomy and prognostication, and more philosophical and theological elements’ (xliii). This division between the ‘experimentally sound’ and ‘pseudo-science’ is, of course, a modern one. The relationship between astronomy and astrology, for example, was close in the middle ages, and where prediction on the basis of the stars was criticised it was usually on theological, moral or political grounds, not grounds of empirical method (though sometimes astrology might be suspected to be a respectable cloak for magical practices: see Ralley, 2010). The way the Wise Book crosses topics reflects a world-view in which the order of the physical universe plays out in microcosm in human bodies and lives while also needing to be understood in terms of God’s providence and salvation history. The Wise Book is a relatively brief and simple expression of this world-view, but all the more interesting for the evidence it gives of the transmission of such ideas to non-latinate audiences. Since the Wise Book is not well known, it seems worth detailing its contents.

There are two recensions, A and B, which Griffin presents in parallel on the basis of two of the most complete MSS; A and B diverge in the closing section, and there is a fragmentary text, Z, printed in an appendix, which conflates these divergent endings. In Griffin’s edition, A runs to 381 lines, and B (in smaller print) to 337.

In both recensions, the text opens by stating that it was compiled from the learning of Greek philosophers and astronomers by a wise Englishman living in Greece. A partial list of the topics to be covered is then given, along with the declaration that without this knowledge ‘no man may knowe ne come to parfit worchynge of astronomye, phisik, ne surgerie, ne of ony other sotill science. For ther is no leche in the worlde þat may trewliche wirche this crafte but if he haue þe science & þe
konnyng of þis boke’ (A, ll. 11–14). Griffin points out parallels here with various aspects of the *Secreta secretorum* tradition and suggests that the opening presents the *Wise Book* as a pseudo-Aristotelian text (li–lii). The emphasis on the importance of its contents to physicians is confirmed by the frequency with which the *Wise Book* is associated with works on uroscopy, medicines, bloodletting and such matters (see the descriptions of MSS at xvi–xxxvi).

The substance of the treatise begins with enumeration and listing of the planets, days, signs of the zodiac and months. An account of each sign is given, with its allegorical significance plus the characterisitics of those born under each sign; for example: The fifth signe, Leo, regnyth in Juyll, & it is clepud þe signe of a lyon, for as myche as Danyell þe profete was putte Vnto a depe pitte among lyonys. Whoso is born in þis signe schall be a bold theff & an hardy’ (A, ll. 55–7). Then it is stated that the seven planets rule sections of each day and influence men’s dispositions according to their birth hour. This gives rise to a disquisition on free will and determinism, one of the major problems of astrology for medieval Christians (A, ll. 90–128). One may choose to do good or ill in spite of planetary influence, but, nonetheless, the planets, signs and elements, which are corrupte as a result of the fall of Lucifer, determine each individual’s ‘fortune…manerys &…compleccionys’ (A, ll. 127–8).

Following sections detail the aspects of the firmament. First comes an account of the eleven spheres that make up the eleven heavens (A, ll. 129–73). The eleventh, outermost sphere contains the throne of God. The signs of the zodiac are in the eighth sphere. The inner seven spheres are associated with Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the sun, Venus, Mercury and the Moon, with the earth at the centre. Some comments are offered on eclipses and also on the nature of some of the heavenly bodies, for example the association of the moon with ‘flume [phlegm], childhode & watir’ (A, l. 173). This leads into descriptions of the four elements, each
with its own sphere (A, ll. 174–94), and then the four complexions or humours, each of which corresponds to one of the elements (A, ll. 194–221).

Next is an account of how the planets, moon and sun rule over sections of each day, some for good and some for ill, with advice on when it is propitious to begin endeavours (the first hour of Sunday, it turns out, is a good time to begin any pilgrimage or major work — no Sabbatarianism here). In B the list of days and their hours extends only as far as Tuesday (ends at B, l. 259). A goes through all the days of the weeks and their hours, offers some advice on reckoning a period of an hour for those without access to an astrolabe, and then (ll. 343–81) concludes with descriptions of the characters and fortunes of people according to the day of the week on which they are born, each day being associated with a particular heavenly body. B instead gives more detailed information on personal characteristics, including physiognomies, of people born under the influence of each of the planets (B, ll. 260–337). It ends with Saturn: the man born under Saturn, a dark, cold, dry and malicious planet, is treacherous, easily offended, and recognisable by his great brows, hollow eyes and thin beard, among other unattractive features. (It may be noted that earlier in the text Saturn has been described as hot and dry rather than cold and dry — A, l. 143; B, l. 136. His malice is consistent, except on Sundays when the hour of Saturn is good, presumably because it is joined to Jupiter: A, ll. 268–9.)

The text is supported by the expected elements of a scholarly edition, including a substantial introduction, lists of variants, commentary, selective glossary and bibliography. The introduction gives explicit attention to practical and theoretical questions of how this text should be edited. As Griffin points out (lxvii), only seven of the thirty-four MSS provide the fullest version of the text. No printed edition can fully convey the variation in medieval readers’ experience of the Wise Book,
which seems to have been useful partly because it was so excerptable, and which in its written forms is strongly shaped by the decisions of editors, the needs of audiences, and the particularities of textual transmission. Griffin’s sensible solution is to print three versions plus variants (A, B and Z, as already mentioned), providing the modern reader with clean and usable texts, but also to give plenty of attention in the introduction to the question of audience.

Several of the manuscripts contain signatures and some can be traced to specific owners (the fifteenth-century manuscript C4 belonged at one time to Samuel Pepys). However, Griffin focuses her discussion on the multi-layered character of both the text itself and its manuscript contexts. The text seems designed to be of use to readers of varying expertise and resources. Griffin makes much of the instructions that are given for measuring intervals of time: for example, in recension A, ll. 338–42:

And if þou wilt marke þe space of an houre, behold an astrolabour; and if þou be vnkonnying of þe astrolabour sette þe space as myche as thou wilt goo two myles in wynter tyme, or ellis in þe somer tyme sette thy space of three myle, or as long tyme as þou maist seie two nocturnys of þy sawter.

In a variant version of this passage MS W2 acknowledges that ‘it is costelew ech man to haue an astirlabre’ (quoted on p. lxi). Thus the audience of the text potentially includes owners of technical instruments alongside those who either cannot afford them or cannot use them. Similarly, the medical texts accompanying the Wise Book in many of the manuscripts vary widely in their level of sophistication (lxv), and Braswell-Means’s study of lunaries, another text-type often found with the Wise Book, suggests a spectrum of users including ‘the rural, non-professional family; the aristocratic household’ and ‘professional medical men and women’ (lxiv–lxv). Griffin argues that the Wise Book ‘can
reasonably be regarded either as a short introduction for the amateur or, for those with some experience and knowledge, a summary’ (lix). The Wise Book, it seems, has a plural, adaptable character even within single texts of its longest versions, as well as in the variation between copies.

In view of the protean nature of the Wise Book, Griffin feels she has to defend its identity as a discrete text. One issue here is whether it should be considered one text with the Book of Destinary, which occurs only in Wise Book manuscripts. Griffin’s answer is no, and since the Book of Destinary is in several cases not contiguous with the Wise Book, this seems logical (xlvii–xlix). The Wise Book has, Griffin argues, ‘a logical structure and central arguments’, with its prologue and its progression from macrocosm to microcosm (xlv). Unfortunately there seem to be no obvious direct source or sources, which would have given an additional perspective on textual integrity. The section on ‘Traditions and Analogues’ (l–lv) mostly addresses issues of authority and affiliation rather than sources. Concerning the possibility of a lost Latin source, Griffin points out that this cannot be assumed and ‘literatures to do with astronomy and astrology must have been composed in the vernacular’ (liv), even if the information in them ultimately goes back to Latin texts (and behind those, she might have added, Arabic and Greek). This is convincing, but I am puzzled by the comment that ‘the emergence of vernacular writing, therefore, coincided with the emergence of the English vernacular (Voigts 1982:40)’. I have not been able to consult the essay by Linda Voigts cited here and can only assume that ‘writing’ means ‘composition on technical matters’ and the ‘emergence of the English vernacular’ refers to the particular extensions of function for English that marked the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; but both the vernacular and vernacular writing have an earlier history of some interest (and there is medical literature in Old English).
Occasions for grumpiness in an Old English specialist aside, this is an attractive, thoughtful and useful edition, and evidently the product of careful and extensive labour. In the presentation of the text Griffin does an excellent job of steering between a misleading simplicity and an overwhelming plurality: she conveys that the text varies while directing the reader towards its most useful incarnations. I would have liked rather more attention to the technical matter in the treatise in the Commentary; the latter offers only modest help to someone trying to puzzle out medieval astronomy, computus or humoral theory, though, given that the main focus of the edition is on the manuscripts and texts, this is understandable. It is not clear why some of the manuscript descriptions give collations and others do not. There are also a number of proofing errors that one hopes will be corrected in a future edition, for example:

- p. xxii is described by in part by Griffin] delete first ‘by’
- p. xxxi Y has catalogued online] insert ‘been’
- p. xxxii Historia septem sapientum Romae] read sapientum
- p. li it would seem likely that…that the Wise Book may in fact have been] delete second ‘that’

However, we should be grateful to Carrie Griffin and the Middle English Texts series for providing a firm foundation for future study of this illuminating example of what might be called fifteenth-century popular science.

Alice Jorgensen
School of English
Trinity College Dublin
jorgena@tcd.ie