



The Voice of the Hammer: The Meaning of Work in Middle English Literature

Nicola Masciandaro

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Shaped by the increasing commercialization of economic relations, the social agitation of the agricultural and artisan classes, and the growing formalization of status consciousness, the cultural landscape of late medieval England was fertile territory for the representation of work. In *The Voice of the Hammer*, Nicola Masciandaro examines the Middle English lexicon, accounts of the history of work, and the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer to reveal that late medieval society understood work as a distinct and problematical field of experience, and that concerns over the relation of work to life were as pressing then as now.

"This book deals with questions that historians of late medieval labour scarcely dare to ask—what is the meaning of the words *werk*, *swink*, and *craft*? How did people in the fourteenth century conceptualize and value work? Much superficial speculation about whether people regarded work as punishing or virtuous can be set aside, as Nicola Masciandaro has applied his formidable learning to supply a nuanced and authoritative analysis of the thinking of such writers as Chaucer and Gower. Anyone enquiring into late medieval attitudes to labour must now take account of this important book." —**Christopher Dyer, University of Leicester**

"In *The Voice of the Hammer*, Nicola Masciandaro engagingly presents a large issue with elegance and capaciousness. His subtle and significant readings of all of the works he addresses support the ingenious topics and important ideas he has highlighted in the broad field of late medieval ideas of labor, at once so central to the concerns of later Middle English poetry and so widely disseminated in the culture from which that arose." —**Andrew Galloway, Cornell University**

"Nicola Masciandaro shows us a contested and complex Middle English set of attitudes towards work, incorporating ideas about nature, humanity's place in the world, and the relation of the present to a simpler past. He gives an intriguing account of the multiple meanings of work in English and shows that texts often regarded as denunciations of workers or of technical progress are more interesting statements about the ambiguity of humanity's control over the world and subjugation to its laws. The result is an important and perceptive contribution to the history of medieval social thought." —**Paul Freedman, Chester D. Tripp Professor of History, Yale University**

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