

**Henry Ansgar Kelly, *The Middle English Bible: A Reassessment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). Print, 368 pp., £58.00, ISBN: 9780812248340.**



*Review*

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The opening to Matthew's Gospel in London, British Library, Arundel MS 104, vol. II (fol. 251r, second column) starts with an elaborately historiated initial 'T', bearing the *animalia* for the four evangelists. This is reproduced on the front cover of Kelly's *The Middle English Bible: A Reassessment*, accompanied by 251r's foliate border, and the result is magisterial. It's a little disappointing that the sheen of the manuscript's gold leaf is not reproduced.

The aims of Kelly's monograph appear accordingly magisterial: his title is broad, and the concerns of his seven chapters varied. Like Matthew's Gospel, the first chapter opens with a search for the ancestry of Kelly's position on the Middle English Bible: deftly summarising centuries of the debate on the translation's orthodoxy, Kelly picks up Dom Aidan Gasquet's neglected late nineteenth-century conclusion that the MEB is likely to have had little or no connection to Wycliffe's teaching and heterodox followers. Chapter 2 aims to redress the critical flaw in Gasquet's initial articulation of his hypothesis – his neglect of the Wycliffite treatise on translating sacred scripture with the incipit *Five and Twenty Books*, a text often presented as a prologue to the MEB. Kelly demonstrates that this 'Simple Creature' is unlikely to have contributed any more to the MEB than four New Testament books in the late version, leaving the greater part of its translation project secure in its absence of heterodoxy.

Building on this suggestion of an orthodox project with unorthodox commentary, Chapter 3 takes the form of an overview of the potential use for an English Bible translation in late fourteenth-century Oxford, as a project with similar concerns to Wycliffe's work but which did not assent to his heterodoxy. Chapters 4 and 5 return to the issue of the text's legality in the context of Wycliffism: Chapter 4 surveys a breadth of positions on English scriptural translation present shortly after the composition of the MEB, whilst Chapter 5 builds on this consideration to examine Archbishop Thomas Arundel's 1407 provincial constitutions and their pertinence to the MEB. Kelly concludes that Arundel was opposed to innovative translation of the scriptures to reflect Wycliffite ideas, in reaction to the treatise *Five and Twenty Books* itself and in anticipation of such texts as the *Longleat Sunday Gospels*, rather than with regard to the existing MEB. Chapters 6 and 7 lead the study back to the initial subject of the long-contested orthodoxy of the MEB after its composition, by examining its treatment in heresy trials across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Whilst there is little to fault in this monograph's argument for the absence of any clear connection between the MEB and heterodoxy, it does not really amount to the scale of reassessment promised by the title and authoritative visual recollection of Matthew's Gospel in Arundel MS 104. There is a disjunction between the book's title and presentation, which promise a monumental reassessment of the MEB, and the course of Kelly's argument, which concerns the MEB's orthodoxy and legality.

Further to this, the MEB itself is strangely absent from the book. As he primarily attends to previous scholarship, *Five and Twenty Books*, and episcopal legislation, Kelly rarely examines or even quotes its text at all. When he does so it tends to be that

presented in Forshall and Madden's 1850 edition with his own modernised spelling – the text from the edition is often presented in end notes, but not consistently. The unusual decision to modernise Middle English spelling throughout the monograph is briefly announced in the preface, following a note which directs a reader to Kelly's 2004 note 'Uniformity and Sense in Editing and Citing Medieval Texts'. This respelling proves to be a very extreme reception of Kelly's own advice, following the brief injunction 'If, however, you wish to respell a medieval text (especially prose) entirely in modern spelling, for the sake of clarity and ease of reading, say so, and do it without any sense of shame or guilt'<sup>1</sup> (pp. xi–xii) I advocate no sense of shame or guilt in editing whatsoever, and this approach does have a certain appeal. Kelly consistently compares the MEB to the Douai-Rheims as a translation project divorced from narratives of Protestant reform and liberation, and his modernisation follows the conventional adaptation of the Douai-Rheims. It nonetheless runs against the logic of Kelly's concern that 'coeval or identical texts which are cited for comparison look as if they come from different worlds; specifically, some seem distinctly "older" than others'.<sup>2</sup> Rather than making passages from such texts look like they come from different worlds, Kelly's approach in this work goes so far as to make passages from texts composed and circulated centuries apart look like they come from unduly similar worlds; extensive visual differences in their language are systematically ironed out.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Ansgar Kelly, 'Uniformity and Sense in Editing and Citing Medieval Texts', *Medieval Academy News*, (Spring 2004), 8–9 (p. 8).

<sup>2</sup> Kelly, p. 8.

This coincides with Kelly's treatment of the MEB as composed of a neatly divided early version and a late version produced between 1375 and 1400, with the outlying cases of a proto-early version possibly produced by 1374 and a unique revised late version in the form of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 277 (c. 1415-1430). The actual material condition of the MEB as a very large body of manuscripts using a language which varied greatly in reproduction is rarely considered; there is an extent to which the printed Douai-Rheims is left to stand as too neat a parallel. Consequently, the particular conditions of production which fundamentally shaped the production, form, and reception of the MEB are consistently and subtly elided.

None of these concerns should be allowed to overshadow the monograph's important contribution to scholarship on the subjects it does treat in depth. Kelly's treatment of both the linguistic habits exhibited in *Five and Twenty Books* and the provincial legislation around scriptural translation is acute, well-substantiated, and very impressive. This is an important and strong piece of work. It simply remains the case that this does not quite amount to a full reassessment of one of the most important pieces of English writing from the later middle ages.

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