for the play Wisdom, she points to the use of costume to visualize meanings of self-knowledge and the soul embodied in the characters of Anima and Wisdom. Here dance and musical accompaniment also aid the audience in sensing their reality for themselves. Comedy, Johnson suggests, was deployed as a counterbalance to the intensity of the call to contemplation of incarnation and to convey reassurance that it was not an impossible challenge. In the play Mankind, scatological speeches and songs reach further to engage the audience but in the recall of their own sinful state and so of the ultimate purpose of knowing God.

It is only here, and only glancingly, that Johnson allows the discussion to turn to the context of these remarkable works. This is an adept and engaging display of close reading, notwithstanding the one or two verbal ticks and try-hard humor of her prose style. Even those intimate with these well-digested texts will be stimulated by her reinterpretation. But specialists in devotional literature or historians of medieval religious practice may be disappointed by the lack of connection to the cultural and social milieus in which the Cloud, Revelation, Piers, and the plays were received.

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Sir John Fortescue occupies a special place in the history of late medieval England. He was a self-made man of law from Devon who rose to the very apex of his profession at a time when the English monarchy endured one of its most violent and self-destructive phases of existence. What made Fortescue so special was that his learning, his experience, and, one suspects, his sound judgment made him an indispensable servant of the Lancastrian dynasty for the best part of thirty years, which in turn thrust him into the very heart of the political maelstrom of the middle years of the fifteenth century. He metaphorically, and possibly quite literally, rubbed shoulders with the key political players of these years, and he witnessed (and to some degree influenced) some of the most pivotal moments of his time. Of particular interest is the fact that as her chancellor, Fortescue was one of the foremost members of Queen Margaret’s entourage when she and her son, Prince Edward, were forced into exile during the 1460s, after the usurpation of Henry VI in 1461. Fortescue’s life, and particularly, his key political works De Laudibus Legum Anglie (1468–1471) and the Governance of England (1471–1475) have long formed the mainstay of the writings of historians reflecting on fifteenth-century political theory and the changeable fortunes of servants of the crown at this time of intense civil strife. Margaret Kekewich’s study is the first comprehensive biography of the man and the first to properly contextualize his extensive writings with the vicissitudes of his life and career. As the foremost political thinker of his time, one is of a mind to comment that such a study has long been overdue.

Kekewich organizes her monograph into two sections. The first provides a detailed biography of Fortescue, with chapter divisions addressing key phases in his life and career, while the second considers his work as a political thinker, again sensibly arranged along chronological lines. In her conclusion, Kekewich describes Fortescue as “able, flexible, hard-working and head-headed professionally and politically he acted pragmatically” (257). These are certainly aspects of his career that shine through clearly in this book. At the heart of the challenge
that Fortescue and his fellow senior justices faced was maintaining impartiality and objectivity in discharging their professional duties at a time when a breakdown in political consensus and the polarization of the political community made it increasingly hard to avoid charges of political partisanship. That Fortescue became a staunch supporter of the Lancastrian cause does, on the face of it, appear to have been more a matter of convenience, ambition, and practicality than a personal or principled conviction in the righteousness of Henry VI's kingship. That his brother was killed by the Yorkists in 1455 and his main patrons were staunch Lancastrians were also, Kekewich implies, key factors. Kekewich criticizes Fortescue and his fellow justices for not supporting the Lancastrian dynasty's legitimacy more strongly in October 1460, but their claim that the law could not determine matters of grave constitutional and dynastic principle was supremely sensible in the super-charged political circumstances of the time and accorded directly with Fortescue's regard for the superior place of Parliament in the polity. This, at least, was one principle that the judge consistently championed throughout his career.

Fortescue's exile with the defeated Lancastrian forces of Queen Margaret was therefore not the act of a brave Lancastrian stalwart acting in accordance with a deeply held set of political beliefs, but was rather an act of self-preservation, after the Yorkists declared him a traitor and forfeited his estates. Like many men of ambition at this time, Fortescue had backed the wrong horse and had now to pay the price. Kekewich shows that in these years of exile, first in Scotland and then in the duchy of Bar, on the eastern border of France, the judge reinvented himself as a polemicist and then as political schemer on behalf of the Lancastrian cause.

One of the more intriguing aspects to Fortescue's role in these years was his relationship with Prince Edward, the now disinherited heir to the English throne. Kekewich builds on a more recent body of scholarship that regards Fortescue's main motivation for much of his writing in these years to have been the instruction of the young prince in the art of ruling, in anticipation of his recovery of the throne. When Lancastrian ambitions came crashing to the ground at Tewkesbury in May 1471, Fortescue once again demonstrated his propensity to make himself useful to those in power. Although he penned the well-known Governance of England in the last years of his life, in many ways his authorship of Declaration upon Certain Writings (1471–1473), in which he proceeded to demolish the merits of the very arguments he himself had made in favor of the Lancastrians ten years previously, epitomized the slipperiness of his political convictions and his ability to construct academic arguments in favor of political (and almost certainly personal) ends. The complexity surrounding Fortescue's career and works thus reflected the complexity of the times he lived in.

Kekewich has produced a masterly account of this key individual. Although no great discoveries are made and no grand new interpretative frameworks offered, the originality and value of this book lies in the synthesis it offers on Fortescue's life and his writing, and the detailed and illuminating links that are made between the two. Kekewich's meticulous investigation into the routine work Fortescue conducted as chief justice is an especially worthwhile aspect to her study. The book is extremely well written and immensely readable; a series of appendices provide useful supporting and contextual material (including the Declaration upon Certain Writings, printed for the first time since 1869). Kekewich remains impressively neutral in her final judgements on Fortescue the man, and readers will need to make up their own minds as to how much sympathy he is accorded. Yet one cannot help but admire a man who, from relative obscurity, navigated the political storms of the middle years of the fifteenth century to become one of the most celebrated English political thinkers of the medieval period. Kekewich has gone far in illuminating the extent of these achievements.

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