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*Chaucer and Langland: The Antagonistic Tradition* (review)

James Simpson

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reality from Christian imagining cannot so easily be assumed. Bale argues that “a contextualised, historically contingent antisemitism does not necessarily involve Jews but can stand alone in Christian culture” (p. 107). He is speaking about the events surrounding the cult of Robert of Bury St. Edmunds, a veneration that came into being as fifty-seven Jews lost their lives. The intimacy of its Jewish population to Bury’s economic and cultural systems has been well documented. The violence exacted by Robert’s cult was practiced against bodies onto which fantasies were projected, but these were also real bodies not nearly so passive as Bale’s formulation implies. Medieval Jews were, as the events at York demonstrated, a people who could resist. Could they also survive their own eradication? Is it possible to hear something of a Jewish history resounding, even deep within a Christian fantasy—especially because, as Bale has so brilliantly emphasized, such Christian fantasies tend to be internally incoherent, heterogeneous, impossibly full?

Miri Rubin in her book *Gentile Tales* stages an astonishing sequence in the text’s middle where the Jews answer back, giving them a voice that has much to say to the Christian fantasies she analyzes. Lee Patterson has done the same in his essay on *The Prioress’s Tale* . . . as has Bale himself in two brilliant essays that laid the groundwork for this volume. Bale lacks such a moment here, but he has nonetheless authored a tremendous book. Because *The Jew in the Medieval Book* seamlessly combines the theoretical (Deleuze and Guattari, for example, make a catalytic appearance in the Chaucer chapter) with the archival and the historical, and because its ambit is so capacious and its findings so well argued, this volume will be required reading in medieval studies for years to come.

JEFFREY J. COHEN  
George Washington University

JOHN M. BOWERS, *Chaucer and Langland: The Antagonistic Tradition*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. Pp. xii, 405. \$45.00 paper.

The last two decades have witnessed a move out from what had been the strongholds of Middle English scholarship, Chaucer and Langland.

One strategy for reconnoitering new territories was to maintain logistical connection with the strongholds. Scholarly scouts did this by exploring the afterlives of both Chaucer and Langland in the fifteenth, and then, as scholarship became more adventurous, in the sixteenth centuries and beyond.

John Bowers was an innovative figure in that exploratory stage: already in 1985 he published an article in this journal, "*The Tale of Beryn and The Siege of Thebes as Alternative Ideas of the Canterbury Tales*" (SAC 7: 23–50). Then followed "The House of Chaucer and Son: The Business of Lancastrian Canon-Formation," *Medieval Perspectives* 6 (1991): 135–43; the far-reaching "Piers Plowman and the Police: Notes Toward a History of the Wycliffite Langland," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 6 (1992): 1–50; the brilliant "Piers Plowman's William Langland: Editing the Text, Writing the Author's Life," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 9 (1995): 65–102; and "Chaucer's Canterbury Tales Politically Corrected," in *Rewriting Chaucer: Culture, Authority, and the Idea of the Authentic Text*, ed. Thomas Prendergast and Barbara Kline (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999).

The book under consideration here represents, as Bruce Holsinger says in his cover promotion, a "consolidation": pretty well each chapter of this book is dependent on work previously published by John Bowers. I'm not sure what rule publishers apply now for what proportion of a book can have already appeared, and I have certainly republished material myself. Whatever the rule, though, I suspect that Bowers has broken it here. For all that, it is welcome to have this material gathered in one place, all sustained by meticulous scholarly reference to the surrounding scholarship of what is by now a fully colonized field (100 pages of notes, and 57 pages of bibliography).

What has been gained, though, by presenting the material as a new argument, rather than as *Chaucer and Langland's Afterlives: Collected Essays by John Bowers*? In its current form, the book seeks to answer the question as to why Chaucer, not Langland, became, in Dryden's formulation, "the Father of English Poetry." The terms of Bowers's answer are strenuously political and, especially, theological (never aesthetic). The answer itself is as follows: that Langland's poem fell foul of censorship, whereas Chaucer himself adroitly performed a kind of "political correction" on the *Canterbury Tales* so as to survive the new conditions of censorship rising into menacing profile toward the end of his career. Despite a resurgence of Langland's fortunes in the mid-sixteenth century, the

Chaucer tradition was carefully managed by his son, well connected to Lancastrian power bases in such a way as to ensure Chaucer's position as the reliably conservative voice of a literary progenitor. Bowers treats the two traditions "in their mutual relationship, each necessary to configure the other" (p. 8). And that relationship is, he argues, antagonistic.

Thanks to the thorough presentation, always sensitive to cultural politics, of the two *Nachleben*, Bowers unquestionably persuades us that the two traditions were significantly and interestingly different. Does he persuade that they were antagonistic?

The book is organized in a slightly odd way, with a very long Introduction (41 pages, 236 footnotes, called Chapter 1), in which the book's entire argument is not only outlined, but made, rendering its status uncertain (is it an introduction or the book's actual argument?). There follow six further chapters. Chapter 2 certainly argues for difference: 1360 for Langland was the Treaty of Bretigny, against whose terms Langland is savagely critical, while for Chaucer 1360 was when he was briefly in French captivity, generating Chaucer's hostility, so Bowers suggests, for all things French. Chapter 3 focuses on names, once again revealing difference: Chaucer's biographical, payable name is part of his oeuvre, and was used in the construction of a literary tradition, while Langland's name is discursive and/or hidden. This chapter rehearses Bowers' earlier work on the tendency of editors, up to Kane, to shape a poet's life in ways that turn out to have striking similarities to the editor's own life. The Chaucer material is not symmetrical, since the discussion of how Chaucer's name is used does not extend beyond Lydgate. The fourth chapter introduces some antagonism, at least implicit or potential: *Piers Plowman* would have fallen foul of Arundelian censorship, while manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* were produced "under the direction of individuals with strong connections to the Lancastrian court" (p. 124). Still, potential antagonism must remain only potential unless it is explicit (and it's also true that *Piers* was bound with Chaucerian works, as in Huntington HM 114, from the second quarter of the fifteenth century). This chapter also rehearses now-well-known arguments that, in the mid-sixteenth century, Bale enlisted Chaucer in the evangelical camp. (That implies that the "antagonism" isn't continuous; for some historical moments it served literary historians to set both Chaucer and Langland in harness.) In Chapter 5 the book's own prose and argument comes alive: Bowers must argue a negative, that the contours and gaps in the *Canterbury Tales* derive from Chaucer adroitly adapting to

new conditions of censorship. Even if this can never be conclusive, Bowers argues resourcefully. The penultimate chapter imagines that Chaucer's papers were kept at his Westminster tenement well beyond his death, before going on to argue how Hoccleve failed and Lydgate succeeded in joining the Chaucerian tradition. The final chapter takes the Langland tradition into the sixteenth century. Bowers argues that Langland's brief midcentury revival was short-lived because of little lasting value to shapers of a cultural tradition. In the course of this discussion, Bowers slightly misstates my own argument that the Langland tradition diminished (p. 218). I do not argue that, but rather that Langland's theology of works sat very uneasily with Protestant denigration of works, provoking not a diminution so much as an etiolation of the *Piers Plowman* tradition's real energy.

In short, this book consolidates previous *Nachleben* work; it is utterly persuasive in its account of a different tradition; it is less consistently persuasive in its account of an antagonistic tradition.

There is one significant error, and, to my mind, one lost opportunity. The error: Bowers asserts that Osbern Bokenham, by praising "Galfri-dus Anglicus" (*Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, lines 83–96), refers to Chaucer. Bokenham is unquestionably referring instead to Geoffrey of Vinsauf: the "newe poetrye" (line 88) can only be the *Poetria Nova*. The editor of the EETS edition, in the marginal glosses, makes the same mistake (p. 3). The lost opportunity is, in my view, the failure to situate Chaucer and Langland within London politics. In "'After Craftes Conseil clotheth yow and fede': Langland and the City of London" (*England in the Fourteenth Century, Proceedings of the Harlaxton Conference*, 1991, ed. N. Rogers (Stamford, Conn.: Paul Watkins, 1993), pp. 111–29), I argued that Langland was aligned with the policies of John of Northampton. Northampton's enemy was Nicholas Brembre, with whom Chaucer had "extensive professional and factional dealings" (Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989], p. 41). Langland and Chaucer were, then, most likely on opposed sides of London politics; that is a potential antagonism, which Bowers should have exploited.

JAMES SIMPSON  
Harvard University