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*A Blessed Shore: England and Bohemia from Chaucer to
Shakespeare* (review)

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This book is a worthwhile project with much of interest, and there is no doubting the author's enthusiasm for the subject. Unfortunately it contains a number of flaws that are distracting. A critical reading before publication could have detected and put right many of these problems.

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ALFRED THOMAS. *A Blessed Shore: England and Bohemia from Chaucer to Shakespeare*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. Pp. 256. \$45.00.

"A quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing": with these words, Neville Chamberlain justified the Munich Agreement of 1938 to his English constituents, dismissing as irrelevant the struggles over the border regions of the young state of Czechoslovakia. The great chasm separating the British Isles from Bohemia—a kingdom roughly coextensive with today's Czech Republic—was not simply geographical, of course. India and its political interests seemed near enough to Chamberlain's still-imperial Britain. Nor, apparently, was this particular chasm a recent development. Shakespeare's attribution of a coastline to landlocked Bohemia in *The Winter's Tale* has frequently been cited as evidence of long-standing English ignorance of the most basic features of the small, central European kingdom. If subsequent events transformed Chamberlain's proud "appeasement" into one of foreign policy's dirtiest words, they did little to bring Bohemia's inhabitants further into the consciousness of Anglophones. With the Czechs sequestered on the far side of the Iron Curtain, it became easier than ever to forget that Bohemia had belonged to Latin Christendom and that Prague had once been a leading city of the Holy Roman Empire, even the capital city of emperors Charles IV (1346–78) and Rudolf II (1576–1612).

Alfred Thomas reminds us of Bohemia's premodern prominence with a welcome literary history that seeks to bridge two important—if partly imaginary—chasms: between Bohemia and England and between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. To do so, Thomas spans the academic divisions that separate the study of Europe's past and its vernacular liter-

atures according to the boundaries of its modern nation-states. That makes this book difficult to categorize. It also makes it a refreshing and important contribution to the study of European culture from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries.

Anne of Bohemia supplies the book's first connection between England and Bohemia. Daughter of Charles IV, king of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor, Anne was Richard II of England's queen from 1382 to 1394. We know frustratingly little about her activities. It is not even clear that she learned any English. But Thomas suggests in the first chapter that Anne, as a "cultural mediatrix," likely served Chaucer as an "imaginary" rather than a real patron, a symbol of the leading humanistic culture of her father's court. Here and in the second chapter, Thomas argues that members of Richard II's court would have recognized England as culturally marginal in comparison with the great imperial court of Charles IV at Prague. Richard's queen and his own later efforts to gain the imperial crown together provide Thomas the frames for discussing well-known works of medieval English literature—such as *The Legend of Good Women*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the *Pearl*—in the context of far less familiar German and Czech vernacular works, including Smil Flaka's *The New Council* (1385), *The Plowman* (1401), *The Weaver* (c. 1406–7), and the fourteenth-century Czech verse *Life of Saint Catherine*. Similarities of genre, style, and symbolism may not uncover direct borrowing in either direction, but they certainly attest to a common literary culture.

Chapters 3 and 4 address the long-recognized influence of the ideas of John Wyclif (d. 1384) on Jan Hus (burned at the stake in 1415) and the Bohemian Hussites. Much of the third chapter is devoted to the vernacular works of Peter Chelcický, a second-generation follower of Hus, who rejected the militarism of both mainstream Hussites (Utraquists) and radical Taborites to champion pacifism and—Thomas argues—an American-style separation of church and state. In the same chapter, letters between Hus and a Lollard leader illustrate one of the book's central arguments—that writers from each land tended to idealize the other, constructing it as a utopian foil to their own land. Thus Hussites and Lollards each saw the other as an ideal home for pure religion communicated in vernacular language. Chapter 4 shifts to an exploration of women in fifteenth-century Bohemia, primarily through a close reading of an anti-Hussite Czech poem, "The Wycliffite Woman," a satirical dawn song that Thomas translates.

The final three chapters (5–7) draw heavily from accounts of and by travelers. Bohemian visitors to England included a Catholic ambassador from the fifteenth-century Hussite king and, in the seventeenth century, a Protestant baron, a noted engraver, and Comenius, the Protestant humanist and educator. Chapter 6 focuses on English travelers to Bohemia during the time of Shakespeare and Rudolf II, when recusants such as Elizabeth Jane Weston found Bohemia an oasis of toleration, a place where Protestants, Catholics, and Jews all flourished. The visits of John Dee, Edward Kelley, Sir Philip Sidney, and Edmund Campion S.J. further inform Thomas's attempt to characterize the Bohemia of Shakespeare's imagination. Thomas concludes that it was not geographical ignorance, but rather partial knowledge of Rudolf's court that inspired Shakespeare's account of the pagan land that provided a safe haven for Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*. For Thomas, Shakespeare's fictive Bohemia and his play's happy conclusion therefore offer "evidence of his ecumenical hopes for a world in which Catholics and Protestants might live together in peace and harmony" (p. 170).

Together, these chapters represent an impressive and important contribution. The book is fundamentally a literary history, and Thomas is strongest when he is analyzing texts, from medieval poems and mirrors for princes to early modern travel accounts. At times, the bridge he builds between the history and literature of England and Bohemia threatens to obscure the extent to which both kingdoms shared in a broader European culture. Late medieval ideals of female royal sanctity, for example, linked England not only to Bohemia but also to nearly every other ruling dynasty of Europe, as Gábor Klaniczay showed in *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses* (Cambridge, 2002). This book's broad and unconventional scope is its great strength, but the same scope will inevitably tempt specialists—like this reviewer, a historian of medieval Bohemia—to quibble over details and lament particular omissions. For instance, Thomas's extended analysis of the Wilton diptych's portrayal of Richard II with England's patron saints could be strengthened by comparison with the analogous depiction of Charles IV and Bohemia's patron saints on the well-studied altar panel commissioned by Prague's archbishop in the 1370s. Also, Milíč of Kroměříž, a Prague preacher and so-called Father of the Bohemian Reformation, was certainly never a Dominican, as Thomas asserts (p. 135). Indeed, the Dominicans, one of several influential religious orders in medieval Bohemia, stand out in this book for the surprising number of generalizations they attract.

Such details do not significantly mar the book's achievement. Perhaps most innovative is Thomas's focus on the Bohemia of English imagination and, to a lesser extent, the England of Bohemian imagination. This motif provides one of the book's stronger links between the otherwise relatively diverse chapters. In one sense, the chapter on the Czech anti-Hussite poem—"The Wycliffite Woman"—seems most out of place. Yet it too belongs here, as its detailed engagement with recent arguments about gender, literacy, and heresy in medieval England best exemplifies the book's consistent efforts to address scholars of medieval and Renaissance English literature. More than a few of them, I hope, will be inspired to explore further the Czech and German literature of medieval and early modern Bohemia. For this, they should begin by consulting Alfred Thomas's other publications.

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MARION TURNER. *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth-Century London*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007. Pp. viii, 213. £53.00; \$95.00.

We have come a long way from the "quiet hierarchies" that D. W. Robertson proposed for the intellectual and social formation of the medieval world. Now conflict, treason, heresy, and social rivalries are detected in every byway of fourteenth-century London. Book titles provide a synopsis of prevailing outlooks: Steven Justice's *Writing and Rebellion* (1994), Peggy Knapp's *Chaucer and the Social Contest* (2000), and my own *Chaucer and Langland: The Antagonistic Tradition* (2007). Marion Turner's book exposes a particularly deadly, depressing version of Greenblatt's arena of social contests. Chaucer was "concerned with depicting the inevitably destructive nature of human fellowship and society" (p. 2) and held out "no hope for social amelioration" (p. 5). So we have also come a long way from E. Talbot Donaldson's jolly, amicable author.

Chapter 1, "Discursive Turbulence," launches the now-normal historicist operation of reading between literary and nonliterary texts. Precise dating of the poet's output therefore becomes crucial, and *The House of*