Writing Masculinity in the Later Middle Ages (review)

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WRITING MASCULINITY IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES. By Isabel Davis. Cambridge
     Studies in Medieval Literature, 62. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
     2007. Pp. xiii + 222. $85.

An odd and perhaps unintended legacy of thirty years of feminist criticism on the
Middle Ages has been to remind us, as does Chaucer's Wife of Bath, of the profound
extent to which medieval literary culture was dominated by men. The still-emerging
field of medieval masculinity studies is thus important not only because it, too, pre-
vents us from too easily universalizing gender-specific aspects of medieval literary
production, but also because it shows us that ideas of what it meant to be a man
in medieval Europe were unstable, changing, and contested. *Writing Masculinity
in the Later Middle Ages,* despite the breadth of its title, focuses on the complexities
of lay masculinity in five writers working in and about London between 1360 and
1430, a period known for both social upheaval and the resurgence of English as
a literary medium. Isabel Davis sees each of these figures—William Langland,
Thomas Usk, John Gower, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Thomas Hoccleve—drawing
on yet deviating from more traditional clerical and aristocratic models of man-
hood to explore, through first-person narration, "a kind of *urbanitas,* a pragmatic,
non-heroic identity" (p. 11) rooted in work and the ethos of labor, particularly
domestic labor.

     She begins her account of late-medieval masculinist subjectivity with Will, the
anxious and questing dreamer/narrator of *Piers Plowman.* Like much estates
satire, *Piers* presents the maintenance of social order as foremost a masculine
enterprise, and marriage readily becomes in the poem a metaphor for all sorts of
social and political relationships. Yet Davis also sees *Piers,* with its contradictory
central figure of the *clericus uxoratus,* as deeply concerned with "marriage and
generative power of fatherhood for its own sake" (p. 33). Focusing in particular
on Wit's speech in Passus 9 of the B-Text, she finds Langland subtly reworking
Pauline textual authority in order to present a positive revaluation of marriage—
from stopgap measure designed to avoid fornication to moral response to the
labor shortages and dislocations resulting from the Black Death. Yet like many
other critics, she also notes that *Piers* is a notoriously inconclusive text, and in-
deed suggests that Langland modifies his ambitious claims for marriage in the
much more circumspect C-Text, leaving readers with a sense of the itinerant
Will's unresolved guilt over married sex and the exact nature and value of his
labor.

     Like *Piers,* each of the works that follow offers a first-person male figure strug-
gling with established textual models for masculine identity. Thomas Usk's *Testa-
ment of Love* presents a conundrum: the "true" confessions of a traitor. Critics,
no doubt rightly suspicious of the narrator of the *Testament,* have tended to read
the love allegory as merely a pre-text to score political points. Davis, by contrast,
sees in the work a "quest for authorization" (p. 51) that is psychological as well
as political, and she is especially concerned with how the allegory responds to
developments of domestic space and contemporary idealizations of the bond
between master and apprentice. The possessions of a well-stocked house may, as
Love claims, effectively crowd out love. Yet home in the *Testament* is also a political,
affective, and erotic haven, where the exiled Thomas can, as apprentice to the
wise mistress Love, labor virtuously and even pleasurably in a life characterized
by duty and obligation, moderation, and sexual continence.

     The later fourteenth century saw a demilitarization of the nobility, and John
Gower seems to have participated in the trend, apparently declining knighthood
and instead becoming a member of that growing clerical-secular hybrid, the non-

military gentry. In his treatment of sloth in Book IV of *Confessio Amantis,* Gower also articulates what Davis calls "a kind of *urbanitas,* a city-based and middling masculinity" (p. 93), foremost by responding to the longstanding model of noble masculine labor, the crusade, in which the knight goes out to unify the world under Christianity and in doing so also colonizes his lady's heart. Through the interaction of two *personae*—Genius, who extols the crusade model, and the distinctly non-militaristic Amans—Gower offers a writerly kind of noble masculinity more distinctly fitting for the clerical-secular hybrid. The traditional knight-errant moves rather than writes. By contrast, the new, more "homely" masculinity involves journeys "through imaginative reflexive spaces of frenetic interior exploration" (p. 82) and engages through poetry in an incorporeal courtship, in which the lady's inhibitions are overcome by means of imagination rather than martial prowess.

Davis returns to the master-apprentice relationship in her discussion of the Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale in Chapter 4. An interloper on the road to Canterbury, the Canon's Yeoman immediately triggers late-medieval anxieties about vagrancy and rebellious apprentices. But the Prologue and Tale in fact show apprenticeship gone awry for a quite different reason. Whereas Usk idealizes the master-apprentice relationship as a model of good parenting, Chaucer presents a case of abuse and the "dangers of blind industry and misguided obedience" (p. 117). Alchemy almost literally blinds the Yeoman, and the Tale suggests that an inordinate desire to know God's secrets is certainly "blind industry" from the standpoint of religious order. The Yeoman's continued deference, and his unwillingness to reveal what goes on in the dubiously *sub*urban home of the Canon, reveals a further blindness, one reinforced by the twin codes of obedience and secrecy in the guild system. Despite or because of the lengthy and overtly confessional Prologue, Chaucer shows the rules of apprenticeship producing a masculine subject that is, somewhat paradoxically, foremost characterized by an inability or unwillingness to know oneself.

In the final chapter, Davis considers writing, the body, and corporation in three works by Thomas Hoccleve: "La male regle," *The Regiment of Princes,* and *The Series.* Hoccleve not only wrote some of the most moving and seemingly autobiographical poetry in later medieval England, but also was, as a clerk of the Privy Seal, keenly aware of writing as a form of labor, a profession. For Davis, a crucial feature of Hoccleve's poetry is how this otherwise secular clerk remains firmly tied to homosocial models of community. Where Langland seems intent on justifying the married state of the *clericus uxoratus,* and Gower promotes the industrious writer-lover as a model of manhood, Hoccleve appears to seek the social and psychological safety of a "home" among the clerks of Westminster, imagining a quasi-monastic body notable for its exclusion of women and even its obliteration of the self in favor of community.

Writing Masculinity contains an admirable series of close readings, and it is to Davis's credit that she avoids neat conclusions, instead remaining open to the tentative and exploratory quality of late-medieval attempts to develop and account for new models of masculine subjectivity. Yet the book could benefit from a final section that ties together some of the threads running through various chapters. The book makes frequent brief mention of the vernacular, for example, and Davis surely must be correct to relate these attempts to delineate a new masculine *urbanitas* to the development of English. Nowhere, however, is there a sustained discussion of the language, or the quickly growing body of secondary writing about attitudes towards the vernacular in later medieval England; it would be interesting to know, for example, whether and how these late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-

century essays in vernacular life-writing influenced later work in English. Equally striking, given the historical and contextual thrust of the book, is the omission of any reference to the Peasants' Revolt, especially given Steven Justice's convincing claims for how the rebellion challenged attitudes about writing, texts, labor, and social order. Finally, it would be interesting to know whether the new masculinities being developed by writers in and about post-Plague London had counterparts in other major European cities of the period, for example Paris and Florence. These criticisms and questions aside, Isabel Davis has written a stimulating book, one that is likely to spur yet more nuanced accounts of life-writing and masculinity in later medieval England.

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Chaucer and the City. Edited by Ardis Butterfield. Chaucer Studies XXXVII. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006. Pp. xiv + 231. $80.

The dozen essays of this attractive collection offer scholarship of critical substance and originality that deserves to be considered and responded to by students of Chaucer and his times. In her Introduction to the book, "Chaucer and the Detritus of the City," Ardis Butterfield calls our attention immediately and repeatedly to the sounds, more than the sights, of London. The essays that follow, she says, call particular attention to the "aural and linguistic, material and historic" (pp. 4, 12) and not "*merely* material" (p. 5) perspectives on "the reading of the city in Chaucer" (p. 6). Opening with an account of the sounds and materials in two exhibits at the Tate Modern, she leads us, in a very few pages, from thinking about the differences and connections between detritus and evidence, to headier regions inhabited by Walter Benjamin and Michel de Certeau. They and Henri Lefebvre (or should it be LeFebvre, as on pp. 4[n.5], 33?), along with Caroline Barron and the book's dedicatee David Wallace, are the influential *genii loci* for a number of the book's contributors. The city, along with the "City," plays its part in the essays: the idea of the city as much as the historical London (and environs) makes this a book that non-Chaucerians may also wish to consult. Chaucerians, on the other hand, will find in it new contexts for and reinvigorated perspectives on Chaucer's London.

Grouped into four categories (Locations, Communities, Institutions, Afterlives), the eleven essays offer varied, if fragmentary, glimpses of largely discontinuous matters: "the spatial extent of the city" (p. 13); "how city communities are created through language, and conversely how poetry is produced and received among city communities" (pp. 16–17); aspects of the "institutional life" of London's few "relatively stable institutions" (p. 18); and "two moments where Chaucer's relationship with the city has a particularly resonant meaning for later London writers and readers," the "long eighteenth century and the nineteenth" (p. 19). In a review like this, it is impossible to do full justice to all the essays. A number of the essays illuminate Chaucer's texts from archival evidence; some offer fresh attention to particular texts in Chaucer's *oeuvre*. Many of the essays open, or refine, useful conversations between Chaucer's works and a variety of contemporary texts and documents, as well as with theorists of the city, ancient, medieval, and modern.

In "Greater London," Marion Turner raises a recurrent theme of the collection, and an instructive qualification of David Wallace's "absent city," by arguing that Chaucer's London is not a "contained, culturally unified city" but a "more complicated and expansive location . . . a place of fluctuating, unfixed bound-