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Chaucer's Queer Poetics: Rereading the Dream Trio (review)

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disorder had the same paradigmatic valence for those who lived through it as it has come to acquire for modern historiography. She is surely wrong to claim that “the fantasy of a continuous political structure” was “impossible to sustain in fifteenth-century England” (p. 49). How else do we understand the motivation for the War of the Roses, except as competing versions of precisely that fantasy? The century’s recurrent dynastic struggles should not blind us to the other models of national community that emerged or intensified, models of which Sanok herself has now happily offered us an additional, compelling instance.

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SUSAN SCHIBANOFF. *Chaucer’s Queer Poetics: Rereading the Dream Trio*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. Pp. x, 308. \$75.00.

Chaucer’s Queer Poetics takes its place alongside other important recent contributions to Chaucer criticism, like those by Glenn Burger and Carolyn Dinshaw, that explore queer sexualities, both as they are represented within individual texts and as they evoke models of reading that disturb comfortable “natural” responses to Chaucer’s poetry. Susan Schibanoff’s book goes further, however, in proposing a “queer poetics” (on analogy to Dinshaw’s “sexual poetics,” p. 13) that informs Chaucer’s writing and extends back to his earliest poetry (most other Chaucer critics working within queer studies focus on the *Canterbury Tales*, especially on the Pardoner). In challenging the traditional division of Chaucer’s career into French, Italian, and English periods, Schibanoff proposes a revisionist trajectory that has Chaucer experimenting with a queer narrator as early as his first major poem, *The Book of the Duchess*; then developing features of that narrator into a provisional, if inconclusive, poetic theory in *The House of Fame*; and finally confidently embodying aspects of a queer poetic in the allegorical figure of a “lesbian” Nature in the *Parliament of Fowls*. Schibanoff thus disrupts the traditional “escape narrative” of Chaucer’s gradual liberation as an English poet of nature, subtly revealing the overlapping significances of terms like “English,” “French,” and “queer,” at the same time introducing a rich and flexible new critical vocabulary for characterizing Chaucer’s art.

Schibanoff constructs this vocabulary partly from close readings of Chaucer's three self-contained dream visions and partly from a learned investigation of Chaucer's sources and the intellectual traditions upon which he was drawing. This method gives her book an impressive scope and usefulness for both the uninitiated reader and the seasoned scholar. Readings of Chaucer's individual poems are interlaced with exciting new analyses of his source texts. In the Introduction and chapter 1, for example, Schibanoff quickly and clearly describes a heteronormative "hylomorphic" poetics, which imposed masculine form on feminine matter and which the Middle Ages derived from Aristotelian physics and biology. She follows this with a history of anti-French, "anti-courtly polemic" in contemporary critics and in their nineteenth-century and medieval forebears, placing next to each other such divergent figures as Orderic Vitalis (1075–1142) and Lee Patterson. The first chapter concludes with brief, acute readings of the twelfth-century *Roman d'Eneas*, and of Chaucer's *Miller's* and *Merchant's Tales*, texts that employ the character of the "queer foil," whose function she identifies as deflecting anxiety about male feminization in the courtly tradition.

Chapter 2 extends these themes and structures into *The Book of the Duchess*, where, Schibanoff argues, the narrator's passivity constitutes his "queerness" (in this case not to be taken over-literally) and "serves as the foil to enhance [the man in] Black's creative agency" (p. 89). The narrator's "unnatural" restraint implicitly challenges the hylomorphic poetics described earlier, which was transmitted by many of Chaucer's sources. The exchange between the dreaming narrator and the bereaved knight also substitutes a new Thomistic reciprocal pedagogy (pp. 83–86), which granted agency to both learner and teacher, for more conventional medieval models of "instruction" (p. 73), where knowledge was simply deposited by a master into the pupil's mind. While grounded in modern "queer theory," this reading of *The Book of the Duchess* is also historically informed and attuned to the poem's likely power dynamics, especially to the deference a young Chaucer would have owed to the subject and recipient of his poem, John of Gaunt.

In similar synthetic fashion, later chapters weave backgrounds and foregrounds together seamlessly. Schibanoff, for instance, follows up a thorough and critically current discussion of Dante's "hermaphrodite poetics" in the *Commedia* (chapter 3) with a discussion of the queer architectonics of Chaucer's *House of Fame* (chapter 4). Likewise, before the book moves on to "Nature's Queer Poetics" (the subtitle of chapter 6)

in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, chapter 5 meticulously traces Nature's lineage back to the goddess Nature, and her sidekick Genius, in Jean de Meun and Alan of Lille and to the Aristotelian concept of *physis*, a locus of sexual equivocation due to its origins in the ambiguous Platonic World Soul (pp. 215–16). Schibanoff's reading of Alan's *Complaint of Nature* is particularly fertile and attentive to both the structure and detail of that difficult poem. This brief summary of the intricate alternation of source text, philosophical background, and Chaucerian counter-text hardly does justice to the elegance, richness, and clarity of Schibanoff's treatment of the complex network of Chaucer's roots in a queer intellectual history to which her book makes a significant contribution.

Not all sections of the book are equally compelling. Over-reading and selective use of evidence occasionally mar the analysis, as, for example, when a single reference to Vulcan (line 138), another to Juno (lines 198–99), and a later allusion to Ganymede (line 589), form the basis of an elaborate argument that Book I of *The House of Fame* represents a failed attempt to “normalize” the Aeneas story (pp. 157–77). Such moments, however, are rare. More typical are the illuminating readings of the Ovidian mythographic tradition, of Jean Froissart and related French courtly writers, of Alan's *Anticlaudianus*, Dante's *Convivio*, and several other Chaucerian texts especially from the *Canterbury Tales* (on which *Chaucer's Queer Poetics* ends in its “Au revoir” chapter).

Its many virtues leave one all the more surprised that no sustained analysis of Chaucer's fourth and final dream vision appears in this excellent volume (why the “dream trio” and not the “dream quartet”?). The Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, cast as a dream, presents some of the clearest evidence in favor of the traditional “escape narrative” that Schibanoff vigorously debunks, as it arguably displays the effete (or queer) narrator in the process of being enslaved to a courtly poetic and devising, perhaps, a subversive mode of counterattack. What might Schibanoff have to say about the strained irony of the *Legend*? We never know, nor does it seem she ever intends to tell us, for even as she hints that the *Canterbury Tales* may be the subject of “another book” (p. 306), she is done with the *Legend* (beyond a handful of scattered references) before she begins.

It would be unfair to conclude, however, by criticizing Schibanoff for *not* writing about a text she does not set out to consider—especially when she herself as a writer is unfailingly generous and fair-minded with the work of her colleagues. *Chaucer's Queer Poetics* is a mature study that

participates in the best traditions of scholarly discourse: collaborative, inquisitive, untiring, and refreshingly undoctinaire.

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KARL TAMBURR. *The Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007. Pp. xii, 211. £50.00; \$85.00.

The harrowing of hell is distinctive to the Middle Ages and in some ways helps to define medieval culture. Although medieval commentators were able to find only the most oblique references to it in the New Testament, its centrality to the life of Christ was seldom in dispute. In the *Legenda Aurea*, Jacobus de Voragine neatly sums up the medieval attitude to the harrowing in his chapter on the resurrection: "Concerning the seventh and last issue that needs to be considered here, namely how Christ led out the holy fathers who were in limbo and what he did there, the gospel has declared nothing openly. Nevertheless, Augustine in a certain one of his sermons and Nicodemus in his own gospel have revealed something of this."

The authorities are the pseudo-Augustine *Sermo 160 De Pascha* (PL 39:2059–61) and the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which contains what in the Middle Ages was regarded as authentic testimony of the harrowing. Postmedieval theology, both Protestant and Catholic, based itself more strictly on the scriptural canon and so denied the authority of the apocryphal gospel. This characteristically medieval idea of the harrowing of hell has been explored a number of times in articles and within monographs and critical editions concerned with larger subjects. Karl Tamburr's book, however, is the first attempt to deal with the subject in its own right as it appeared in the culture of medieval England. The focus is mainly on textual traditions, including the liturgy, but there is as well a rich body of visual representations of the subject, and he uses this material here to provide points of reference in different periods and contexts.

This book has strengths and weaknesses. The strengths are its range of reference and the author's willingness to investigate a variety of texts and visual representations. It draws on material from the early Christian