

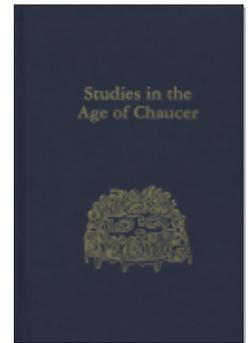


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The Orient in Chaucer and Medieval Romance by Carol F.
Heffernan (review)

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The great strength of this book is its expansive reading across the vernacular literary tradition of the late Middle Ages. This reading is accomplished in clear, articulate prose, with humor and complete authority. At the same time, this breadth of reading requires extensive and frequent citation of various texts essential to the argument. While the forest is never lost for the trees, it is sometimes obscured. Clear introductions and a retrospective Afterword consolidate and sharpen the complex argument, recalling the larger, overarching purposes of the book. This study is provocative in its theses and impressive in its learning. If one may quarrel with some of the interpretations and readings, one closes the volume full of ideas and questions about a freshly delineated field of reception and transmission of the topos of the abandoned woman in late medieval literature.

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CAROL F. HEFFERNAN. *The Orient in Chaucer and Medieval Romance*.
Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003. Pp. x, 160. \$70.00.

Carol F. Heffernan's *The Orient in Chaucer and Medieval Romance* is a collection of essays on how the "orient" appears in Chaucer and a selection of medieval English romances. The book does not attempt to offer a coherent argument about medieval "orientalism," as Heffernan explains in her introduction: "This study focuses on a genre and a place—'romance' and the 'Orient'—as they are exemplified in late medieval English literature, especially in Chaucer" (p. 1). Furthermore, Heffernan explains, "This study does not press anything like a continuous argument for medieval orientalism of a Postcolonial stamp, though a connecting purpose of the six chapters of this book is to show how the Orient and the people in it are presented in late medieval romance" (p. 1).

Arguing that one can discern an "oriental influence" in medieval romances, Heffernan argues that romance appeared in Europe following the Second Crusade and that this aristocratic genre makes "love," "courtship," and "marriage" central issues (p. 4). After a brief overview of crusade history, also covered in the introduction, five discussions of

romances follows. The first (chapter 2), “Mercantilism and Faith in the Eastern Mediterranean: Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*, Boccaccio’s *Decameron* 5.2, and Gower’s *Tale of Constance*,” examines Chaucer’s tale in light of its analogues. The issue of the “orient” slips into the background, as happens in a number of the book’s discussions, as the author delves into her analysis of the differences and similarities between Chaucer and his sources. The result is that we get neither a solid philological study nor a thematic and theoretical discussion. Philology, as nineteenth-century scholars understood the term, has much to offer medieval scholars. This book reminds us that interdisciplinary knowledge applied to the entire written record of the past, including runic inscriptions, law codes, folktales, and high poetry or literature, and used systematically opens up themes and topics in the literature often overlooked by more theoretical approaches.

Chapter 3, “Two Oriental Queens from Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*: Cleopatra and Dido,” declares its subject, “another side of the Orient . . . the locale of secret pleasures and sexual excess” (p. 45), in the first sentence. This is fair enough, and virtually a commonplace of Western literature from Virgil to Chaucer. But here too I began to wonder why these two had been singled out. One of the more interesting aspects of *The Legend of Good Women* is that the women Chaucer chooses are from many different regions of the ancient world, and that Chaucer appears to challenge some of the received views of “oriental” women, as indeed with Dido, Cleopatra, and Medea. Unfortunately, this nuance, which is precisely what singles Chaucer out on this topic and makes his discussion of these famous women interesting, is lacking in the discussion.

Chapter 4, “*The Squire’s Tale*,” argues that although the tale represents a cornucopia of Eastern elements (motifs, themes, setting), its structure is European, even though it also exhibits traits of the framed narrative, a genre we know originated in the East. Arguing that “interlace” is European (pp. 68–81), Heffernan cites examples in Anglo-Saxon poetry and art. With an argument based on secondary sources discussing the *Thousand and One Nights*, *The Panchatantra*, and *The Thousand and One Days*, which are heavily contested as far as dating and origins, she posits that *The Squire’s Tale* adopts the “interlaced structure of medieval French romances,” which Chaucer has combined with “whatever oriental tales he read or heard” (p. 81).

The last two chapters discuss “Floris and Blancheflur” and “Le Bone

Florence of Rome,” respectively, each chapter addressing Eastern material in the two romances. Making an argument from absence, always tricky when source-seeking, Heffernan posits from the fact that all the extant English manuscripts of the Middle English versions of *Floris and Blancheflur* lack “the part of the tale relevant to the birth of the heroine” (p. 83) that Blancheflur’s birth was a result of an incestuous relationship between her Christian mother and the Saracen King of Spain, her mother’s master and Floris’s father. Given the sibling relationship of Islam and Christianity, “incest” is clearly a provocative metaphor for discussing the relationships between the two cultural worlds that are locked in an internecine struggle yet are members of the same family. The story of the three rings made by the same father (*Decameron* 1.3) demonstrates how commonplace the idea of the family relationship among the three religions was in medieval Mediterranean culture. Indeed, the romance offers us a textual route into such a discussion when “Floris and Blaucheflur are described as if spiritual brother and sister” (p. 92). Yet, Heffernan does not pursue this line of inquiry. Rather, she takes us far afield, hypothesizing whether Blancheflur’s mother was raped and using ancient Greek literature to support this notion (pp. 88–89).

Heffernan’s discussion demonstrates solid knowledge of languages and sources, and in general the book is clearly and carefully written as far as style and expression are concerned, a considerable accomplishment. My overall concern is with the logic of the book because the essays do not build an argument; rather, they hover around a subject, the East as a topic in the romance genre. The author hypothesizes about sources but then retreats from such discussions. She refers to theoretical discussions of “orientalism” but seems uncomfortable pursuing these arguments too far.

The problem here, it seems to me, is that if we want to deal with *Quellenforschungen* in Eastern material, we need to start by recognizing how secular narratives, like merchants, have circulated across the ancient roads for millennia. Interest in the East is not a uniquely nineteenth-century European project. Attraction to the East has not been limited to the financial transactions of merchants, the goals of adventurers, governments, and armies, the ambitions of missionaries, or the interests of scholars, as expounded by the late great Edward Said in *Orientalism*. When we take into account both the philological work of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that was entranced with finding

sources together with the postcolonial discourse about “orientalism,” what is surprising is how little attention is paid to the circulation and exchange of secular narratives and secular ethics and the entrepreneurial creativity of storytellers.

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GERALDINE HENG. *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. Pp. xii, 521. \$45.00.

In this provocative study, Geraldine Heng defines romance capaciously as a genre that stages the collision of history with cultural fantasy. In her view, romance is a kind of performative cannibal that “coalesces from the extant cultural matrix at hand, poaching and cannibalizing from a hybridity of all and any available resources, to transact a magical relationship with history, of which it is in fact a consuming part” (p. 9). In Heng’s view, historical trauma, tension, travail, and transition all leave their mark and seek amelioration within the desirous stagings of romance; in one of her metaphors, history is the irritant pearly and rendered pleasurable within romance’s oyster, in a “graduated mutating of exigency into opportunity” (p. 3).

Heng seeks to correct previous scholarship’s overidentification of romance with chivalric romance and instead proposes a five-headed typology of romances: historical, popular, chivalric, family, and travel. This widening of the social sphere of romance is both provocative and strategic, serving Heng’s need to treat romance as a barometer for the desires of whole cultural moments rather than as indices of the situated interests of particular groups, notably the gentry or the clergy. To buttress the idea of romance as legible and performative zeitgeist, Heng sidelines the traditional romance-studies focus on authorship and authority in order to treat romance as a sedimentation of culture, enterprised and consumed by many in burgeoning textual traditions, disseminated in a variety of manuscript (and eventually print) cultures, and consumed by a diversity of audiences. Although she offsets her chosen texts with a formidable array of primary sources, she focuses on five central works or