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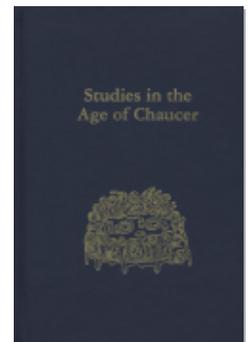
The Judaic Other in Dante, the Gawain Poet, and Chaucer by
Catherine C. Cox (review)

Sylvia Tomasch

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ciously drops the brief passages of proverbial wisdom or etiological material, which Chaucer could have recalled from memory.

Anita Obermeier adds a welcome concluding chapter on the “Retraction.” After discussing the medieval understanding of *retractio* as “re-treatment” or “revision” rather than recantation, she prints an example from Bede, four analogues of Chaucer’s profession of authorial humility, twenty-three analogues of the idea of worldly vanity, and three analogues that include lists of works by the author.

In the texts and information it provides, this *S&A* is a worthy successor to *B&D*. As a work of criticism, it is far more heterogeneous. In 1940, the contributors were unified less by the editors’ mandate to refrain from interpreting their material than by shared, unstated assumptions about what makes a text a source or an analogue. With few exceptions (e.g., Bleeth, Beidler), these assumptions remain unanalyzed in the new *S&A*. Some contributors cleave to old conceptions, others take a more expansive view, still others combine elements of both. Too often defining terms, such as “possible source,” which need comment, are adopted without it; too often assertions about textual affiliation made in their name pass without interrogation. What does it mean, I found myself asking, to consider a text a source in the absence of direct verbal imitation? Can we not develop a theory of cultural translation that speaks meaningfully of the influence of analogues by acknowledging the full weight of their differences? Like the old, the new *Sources and Analogues* is an invitation to revisit ideas about the purview and practice of source criticism; meanwhile, for the many treasures it does contain, we owe the editors and contributors our heartfelt thanks.

WARREN GINSBERG
University of Oregon

CATHERINE C. COX. *The Judaic Other in Dante, the Gawain Poet, and Chaucer*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005. Pp. 265. \$65.00.

Catherine Cox’s *The Judaic Other* is, by turns, illuminating and exasperating. Her overall framework—that “supersessionist hermeneutics, as both concept and method, informs the poetry and poetics of the late

medieval period" (p. 1)—is one with which I profoundly agree. Cox's readings of textual "confiscatory hermeneutic gestures"—founded on "Christianity's [conflicted] relationship to its originary matrix" (p. 3), leading to "platitudinous rehearsal" (p. 21) of anti-Judaic stereotypes, "performative utterances of the faithful" (p. 23), and "[u]surpative appropriation [that] erases the identity of those whose heritage is co-opted in the guise of respect and inclusiveness" (p. 16)—are thoroughly argued in her analyses of "the hermeneutic Jew in Dante's *Commedia*" (chapter 2), "the Hebrew truth in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (chapter 3), and "the Jewish Pardoner and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*" (chapter 4). However, I find these readings to be ultimately unconvincing, based as they are on the assumption that these poets knew and knowingly drew upon some specific Hebrew traditions, particularly the talion code and the Mishnah Sotah (p. 7). Cox elaborates at length on the misinterpretation of talion and the Sotah in the Christian tradition, and her arguments that such misinterpretations fitted Christian supersessionist purposes are entirely convincing. However, that Cox is able to bring such misinterpretations and revaluations to our attention is not the same as saying the poets knew and used them. Cox's book, therefore, also raises, albeit unintentionally, the question with which all readers are plagued, medievalists perhaps more than most: How much of what we read out of a text is purely an effect of what we read into it?

As her epilogue makes clear, Cox is intent on putting "the Jew" and "the Judaic" back into the Christian tradition from which they have been deliberately erased even to the present day (for one instance, see the classroom episode described on page 152), rather than on showing that the specific traditions she cites are those with which the writers on whom she focuses had knowledge, familiarity, or even passing acquaintance. And if they did have such traditions in mind, how did they obtain them? I don't doubt that we can—and should—read medieval texts with our own knowledge, ideas, biases, and preferences intact, for how could we avoid them? Like other modern-day theoretical readings of medieval texts, anti-anti-Judaic readings reveal possibilities that without those perspectives could never be seen. Yet, at some point, such possibilities, however intriguing, must remain possibilities only. Accepting those possibilities allows the texts to speak more interestingly to us; their meanings shift according to our interests and fashions. But those interests and fashions are always our own.

In *The Judaic Other*, Cox gestures in this direction when she asserts

that “[r]eaders who assume that the texts are intended to appeal to a unified, homogeneous audience with anti-Judaic evangelical beliefs, or, conversely, who consider these authors to be prescient spokesmen for current multicultural agendas and popular issues of tolerance, miss the subtly destabilizing compromises and contradictions that generate the texts’ numerous and intricate subtextual engagements with scripture and alterity in context, an opportunity to explore asymmetrical hierarchies and the ideologies that produce and sustain them, specifically the tensions inhering in Jewish-Christian contiguity and conflict” (pp. 33–34). (This sentence is, unfortunately, typical of Cox’s style.) Cox is consistent on this point: in their use of Christian scripture and Christian scriptural rewritings of Hebrew scripture, the poems are more complex than scholars have yet seen. But such complexity is very different from the poets’ direct use of the Hebrew tradition, which is something Cox also asserts. Speaking of *Gawain*, for instance, she writes: “the construction and articulation of identity in the course of the penitential sequence can be analyzed in relation to the creation and expulsion sequences of both the Vulgate Genesis and the Hebrew בְּרֵאשִׁית, Ber’eshit” (p. 77). Scholars might reasonably assume that the *Gawain*-poet knew the Vulgate Genesis, but Cox offers no evidence for any acquaintance with the Hebrew Ber’eshit. Similarly, Cox states that “Gawain’s dilemma can be elucidated by way of the Green Chapel’s allusive relationship to the land of Cain’s exile, אֵרֶץ נוֹד, ‘erets-Nod, a highly symbolic biblical and narrative space” (p. 78). But, as Cox herself would likely agree, the Christian “land of Nod” is *not* the same as the Jewish “‘erets-Nod,” for the difference in naming brings with it a host of other connotations; these are never shown to have been known to the *Gawain*-poet himself. Nonetheless, Cox concludes that “SGGK’s poetics . . . are based upon its intertextual and intercultural engagement with not only Christian but also Jewish exegetical modes.” This is an exciting assertion, but no evidence is adduced in support of it.

Despite the stylistic heaviness and a tendency toward theoretical and conceptual slippage—to give just one example, Cox’s Pardoner is simultaneously “hermaphroditic,” “androgynous,” “neuter” (p. 119), and “gay” (p. 124), terms that are decidedly *not* synonymous—Cox does valuable work by bringing forward ways of reading and texts that have not previously been known or known well enough by medievalists in general. It is a tribute to her extensive analyses that a poem like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* now seems Christian at its core in ways I

would not have previously recognized. But still, I am left with some difficult questions: How do we use texts and traditions in ways that illuminate but not exasperate? How do we consider past cultural productions so as to speak fairly to the conditions of writing and reading in the fourteenth century as well as to the conditions in the twenty-first? How do we, as modern readers who resist the naturalization of supersessionist rewritings, nonetheless respect the power of such interpretations in our own attempts to understand poems that are, in many ways, as foreign to us as the Hebrew texts were to medieval poets? I don't have the answers, except that I know we must take such texts, such modes of interpretation, and such questions seriously, and we must be very careful in doing so.

SYLVIA TOMASCH

Macaulay Honors College of the City University of New York

MARILYN DESMOND. *Ovid's Art and the Wife of Bath: The Ethics of Erotic Violence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. Pp. xiii, 206. \$52.50 cloth. \$20.95 paper.

One might not think that “free speech and academic freedom” as “principles that have come under enormous political pressure in the few short years since September 2001” have much to do with Ovid and the Wife of Bath. However, in an opening excursus on a Woman's Studies conference that included a session on S/M, Marilyn Desmond relates contemporary cultural politics to sex and violence in medieval authors. Desmond generalizes from this incident that S/M is today “intensively policed” (p. 4), while maintaining that today in Britain and the United States “domestic violence has generally been tolerated . . . as part of the status quo” (ibid.). The transition from S/M to Chaucer is achieved through a citation from “one S/M practitioner” who “longingly writes” that “(f)or years I was actually unhappy about the civilized times I lived in, full of envy for people who had lived in the Middle Ages, in the days of witch-hunts and the Inquisition” (p. 5). The medieval, in other words, has always been a fantasy space psychologically. Desmond hopes, therefore, that “perhaps the constructs of the medieval past might elucidate specific performances of contemporary heterosexualities in terms of