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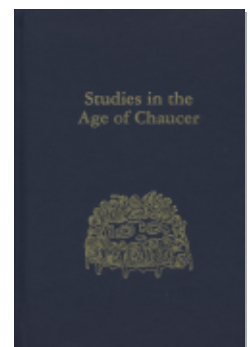
*Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000–1534* by Kathy Lavezzo (review)

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concerns that are current preoccupations across many disciplines: England and Europe; markets and economies; canon formation and literary history; printing and state power; genealogy and succession. “History of the book” is here proposed and explored as a branch of cultural theory, and with often interesting results, although sometimes a vague sense that evidence is sought to demonstrate the truth of particular models, rather than responded to for what it can suggest on its own terms. The best of the essays ask new questions and suggest some new approaches, particularly in their understanding of the complicated relationships between manuscript and print, between printers and the markets they both cultivated and responded to, and between Englishnesses of various sorts.

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KATHY LAVEZZO. *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000–1534*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. Pp. xiv, 191. \$65.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

With Kathy Lavezzo as a guide, one feels in capable hands—even in a landscape of daunting proportions. *Angels on the Edge of the World* brings together a swath of understudied material, orders it with a clean argument, and, in so doing, provides a compelling introduction to three discourses whose “subtle [intertwining]” (p. 73) has grown in importance to medievalists of late. Lavezzo’s focal concerns are “geography” (including cartography), “literature” (most often historical writing), and “English community,” a category whose limitations are communicated in the interrogative section title—“A Medieval English Nation?” (p. 8)—that serves as her point of departure. The book’s dates are daringly splayed, but each chapter takes as its focus a carefully historicized textual location. Starring roles go to Aelfric, Anglo-Saxon homilist (c. 950–1010); Gerald de Barri (a.k.a. Gerald of Wales), in his capacity as ethnographer of Ireland (c. 1187–89); Ranulph Higden, compiler of the *Polychronicon* (c. 1327–60); the ubiquitous Geoffrey Chaucer, as represented by *The Man of Law’s Tale* (c. 1394); and—an outlier in disciplin-

ary terms, since his “texts” are processions—Cardinal Thomas Wolsey (c. 1472–1530), adviser to Henry VIII.

*Angels on the Edge of the World* argues that “for medieval English writers and mapmakers . . . the image of their geographic otherworldliness contributes to the production of national identity” (p. 14). Refinements on this core idea of England’s “geographic marginalization” (p. 82) proliferate, the valence of each being determined by local interpretive needs. Thus we encounter the radical “geographic alterity” of the English (p. 10), their special status as a “people set apart from the world” (p. 82), their “geographic remoteness” (p. 53), “privileged placement” (p. 50), “exceptional strangeness” (p. 11), “vulnerability” (p. 37), and more. From a textual standpoint, none of these claims rings false. This comment says much about the critical due-diligence of *Angels*, yet Lavezzo’s literary and cartographic readings do not impose so much as suggest themselves. Her most arresting claim concerns the persistence of England’s investment in its “geographic otherness” (p. 104). As the book hammers home, a counterintuitive attachment to the concept of their island-realm’s constitutive marginality (dare one call this spatial essentialism?) continues to haunt insular imaginations long after events such as the discovery of America “should have demolished the notion of English geographic isolation” (p. 25). *Angels* dwells less on establishing England’s marginalized identity than on articulating the “two-fold meaning” (p. 76) inherent in this formulation.

Lavezzo is ferocious in her attention to the profound “geographic ambivalence lying at the heart of England’s emergent identity” (p. 70). Indeed, ambivalence drives her argument (itself quite clear, paradoxically). Many readings begin by tracing a line in which the disenfranchised English are maligned as barbarous or backward (pp. 37, 104) only to double-back and pursue a course that seizes upon the “advantages of England’s border positioning” (p. 82). But Lavezzo’s interpretive tacking is neither indulged without cause (her works *are* highly polysemous) nor conducted without payoff. Century after century, “marginality and exceptionalism” emerge as sides of the same coin: the “two mutually constitutive traits that define England” (p. 73). An evolving geopolitical exceptionalism coupled with abiding belief in their spiritual and ethnic “election” (pp. 28, 31) would eventually suggest to the English “how [they] should be the rightful masters of the earth itself” (p. 21). Yet the “ambivalent responses to English otherworldliness” that Lavezzo discovers throughout her long premodern period

“foreshadow as well the ironies that mark the modern geographic production of English imperial identity” (p. 26).

Contemporary maps play supporting roles in this account. Thus the Cotton/Anglo-Saxon map of the world (c. 1000) illustrates Aelfric’s Rome-centric but Anglo-partisan thinking; Gerald’s textual designs on Ireland sharpen against his Map of Europe, “the fiction of [whose] cartography authorizes a geographic vision of England as expansionist world center” (p. 69); the *mappamundi* that fronts the Ramsey Abbey copy of Higden’s nationalist universal chronicle “privileges the English world border” to suggest that his native island “merits the same historical prominence” accorded Rome (p. 73); and so forth, down to two (medieval?) maps inventoried among Cardinal Wolsey’s household goods (p. 116). (The Chaucer chapter—published in earlier form in *SAC* 24 [2002]—treats cartography metaphorically.) Map-habits aside, another tactic of Lavezzo’s chapters is to take some radical diachronic flight, veering to consider William Godwin’s 1803 musing upon “what [Chaucer] and Petrarch would have made of each other had they ever met” (pp. 93–94), or Elizabeth Elstob’s 1709 deployment of an anecdote from Aelfric to “enable colonial empathy for slaves of color” (pp. 44–45). Such moments symbolize Lavezzo’s work. Her theoretical, textual, and historical fluency allows her to cross borders with aplomb.

As glances toward “national hobbies such as the English garden and . . . World Cup football” (p. 10) signal, Lavezzo stretches her temporal canvas taut. She proffers the year 1534 as historical terminus, yet the territorializations sketched by *Angels on the Edge* hardly dissolve with the Middle Ages. (If anything, their importance increases during the high-colonial and arch-nationalist centuries to follow.) As with “1534,” the round originary date of “1000” misleads, for the anecdote launching *Angels* concerns Pope Gregory the Great (540–604), who is smitten at the Forum by some heathen slave-boys, “white of body and . . . of noble hair” (p. 38). “Rightly are they called Angles [*angli*],” he puns, “since they have the beauty of angels [*angeli*].” Lavezzo’s title derives from the wordplay whereby Gregory transmutes his bodily attraction to such “angels” into a missionary desire to draw their homeland, situated at the world’s top edge or “angle” (per later punning), within the authorizing spiritual embrace of Rome. The “white angels” of Aelfric’s account flirt with blackness (pp. 38–40), then return as “Irish Angels on the Edge of the World” (p. 54), later to become “Angels at the Center of the World” (p. 87). The Man of Law makes Custance virtually “an angel of

God,” “set apart from Rome yet possessed of Christian law” (pp. 97, 103). (Cardinal Wolsey manages no such trick.) Such touches are indicative of the book’s crafting.

*Angels on the Edge* trains its focus on England. Yet while the category that dare not speak its name (the term “nation” is absent from the index) stays foregrounded, the perspective of our surveying shifts. Lavezzo’s chapters will appeal according to the interests individual readers bring. My heightened moments came during her original analysis of understudied maps, but personal proclivities aside, most outstanding is Lavezzo’s virtuoso introduction. Grounded in medieval evidence yet leavened by theoretical prompts, these lucid pages will become required reading for many. If one consequence of the introduction’s success is that it steals some thunder from ensuing chapters, this seems a fair exchange for a performance of such verve and erudition.

There are times, during what follows, when one desires this book to be other than it is. Lavezzo entertains many questions, but others arise: How does this Higden *mappamundi* compare to others that survive? What challenges to English and Irish marginality does Gerald’s work on Wales introduce? And what about the rest of the far-flung *Canterbury Tales*? Much might be gained through increased attention to each text’s synchrony of complications; yet compromised, by consequence, would be the sleek verticality that makes *Angels on the Edge* literally a trailblazing study. No meandering here: this book takes us places.

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SETH LERER, ed. *The Yale Companion to Chaucer*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. Pp. ix, 420. \$65.00

The most obvious reason for the flood of companions to Chaucer and medieval literature in recent years is economic. Universities have largely renounced their commitment to underwriting the costs of academic publishing, demanding of their presses that they publish with an eye firmly fixed on the bottom line. Since companions can be marketed for something akin to “textbook adoption,” they are potentially more profitable than books whose intellectual or scholarly agenda is, to use