Style and Consciousness in Middle English Narrative by John M. Ganim (review)

Wolfgang Riehle

which are concerned with an anagogical reading of human action, and works such as the *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*, which are concerned just as much with exploring the varieties of human action in themselves. The Princetonians close the gap by arguing for Boccaccian and Chaucerian ironic orthodoxy, but for most readers the key question remains whether the *Roman* belongs to the first group or the second. If it belongs to the first group, Fleming is, simply, right. If it belongs to the second, he may still be right, but that would finally be irrelevant. Reason's rationality would coexist with the quest for the Rose in the same way *The Parson's Tale* coexists with the Miller's, or Shakespeare's Octavia with Cleopatra, as one of a series of perspectives, resisting closure. The poem's resistance to any single interpretation is paradoxically witnessed to by Fleming's book, for the great *querelle* of the *Roman* is clearly far from over.

HELEN COOPER
University College, Oxford

JOHN M. GANIM. *Style and Consciousness in Middle English Narrative*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983. Pp. ix, 177. $23.00.

This book is a useful contribution to the study of medieval English narrative. It contains several chapters on *Havelok the Dane* and *King Horn*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Siege of Thebes*, and *The Testament of Cresseid*, and it focuses on "the ways in which the medieval narrative poet structures a world for his audience" (p. 14). The author starts with a consideration of the fact that the texts were originally delivered to listeners rather than readers. He attempts to qualify Auerbach's famous analysis of the relationship of poet and audience with the question of the dramatization of the reader in the poetic text.

His interpretation of *Havelok* and *King Horn* is sensitive and suggestive, although he has a penchant for abstract and sometimes speculative statements. He rightly states that the reduction of the narrative technique to that of a ballad produces a "mechanical system of shorthand" narration which the audience was supposed to "fill in" (p. 42). Ganim further shows how the figures act in a historical vacuum. But he somewhat misinterprets

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the original function of these romances by regretting that, instead of reflecting the "sense of crisis in medieval consciousness" these romances deal with the "timelessness and 'no-place' of utopia" (p. 54). The moral climate of the poems, Ganim is correct to point out, never runs counter to the established values of the audience and is relieved by elements of entertainment, sometimes similar to the naïve fantasy world of the modern cartoon or western. The richness of the poem is seen to be part of the artistic technique of oral formulaic poetry, but here it is a deliberately sought effect "by a lettered poet working in a literary tradition of limited vocabulary" (p. 45). Ganim is also right in maintaining that in the romance of *Havelok* the narrator gains considerable aesthetic importance and that this fact helped prepare the solution of problems in the narrative texts of the next century including those of Chaucer.

In the following chapters Ganim discusses the essential change that took place in the relationship between the poems and their audience in the fourteenth century. Being no longer content with asserting the established values of the audience, the authors rather attempted to challenge them by making abundant use of irony and by playing games with the reader. Thus the poetic method of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is defined by Ganim as throwing the audience off balance by assigning ambiguity to concrete situations. The poem, although dealing with profound moral issues, does not reveal meaning either in the "action" of the plot or in its use of "symbols." The original readers, who were aware of a potential meaning in all natural elements, were called upon to undertake a critical examination of Gawain's world which consists of an incredible profusion of elaborately presented elements, and they had to choose for themselves between significant and superfluous details. At the end of the romance the values of the audience are reaffirmed, but not without significant ironic modification. No doubt these comments of Ganim's are perceptive; it should be added, however, that this kind of artistic structure is not particularly typical of works of the late fourteenth-century but can be found in many great works of art.

According to Ganim, the climax in the manipulation of the audience by the narrator is reached in *Troilus and Criseyde*, because here the reader is treated almost as if he were an extra character. He is made a participant as well as a voyeur of the narrated story, and he experiences its "moral" in the very act of reading. It is interesting that Ganim's conclusion is comparable to that of Piero Boitani in his parallel study *English Narrative in the 13th and 14th Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), published a

year before; Boitani, however, sees the readers not as an additional character but rather as coauthors (p. 202). Whereas Ganim's overall assessment of *Troilus and Criseyde* seems convincing, his discussion of the end of the romance is somewhat misleading. Can the fact that the reader is made to share Troilus's vantage point from the eighth sphere be really compared to Brecht's modern distancing technique? And did the ending of the romance really provoke the same shock and feeling of discontinuity to the medieval reader as it does to us? Thus his interpretation of the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* has an all-too-modern tendency. By comparison, Boitani is again nearer the truth when he writes that "the dichotomy between this story (the tragedy of an earthly love) and the truth (that of God . . .) remains, but in the fourteenth century this was completely natural (p. 224).

The next chapters of Ganim's book are concerned with certain artistic limitations of works of the fifteenth century. The author shows how in Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* a "poetry of irony" is tranformed into a "poetry of emphasis" (p. 111). In the work of Henryson he detects a "replication of forms, themes, symbols, and images" which are merged into "an imposing imitation of order" (p. 124).

Yet instead of offering a synthesis of literary traditions, Henryson, according to Ganim, only exploits their exhaustion. As he writes from a medieval rather than "Renaissance" imagination, he has a "tendency to limit the response of the audience" (p. 127) and to restrict even the scope of his poetry as a whole. This verdict seems slightly unfair because recent research has rightly pointed out that Henryson has achieved artistic independence which enabled him to dispense with the morality of the story and to let it speak for itself. Furthermore, Ganim's thesis that not even the moral concern inherent in these romances is strong enough to serve as a simple unifying force is true only to a certain extent, for in the Middle Ages artistic unity was certainly very different from our own expectations. It was, in the terminology of Jordan, to which Ganim himself refers in the notes, rather "inorganic" than "organic." Yet objections like these do not seriously impair this study, the essential quality of which lies in its abundance of stimulating suggestions.

WOLFGANG RIEHLE
University of Graz