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The Scandal of the Fabliaux by R. Howard Bloch (review)

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coming away with the impression of Blake's bias, as clearly expressed in his historical works, against the literary, critical, philosophical, and theoretical in favor of the material, economic, and historical. One finds the best annotations on the influence of patronage and other economic forces on Caxton's press and finds very little on Caxton's critical abilities. However, in a "Bibliographical Guide" one does not necessarily expect consistently useful, detailed annotations. The ones that are given — many with internal cross references to other entries or references to reviews — are most welcome, but even so, it is difficult not to get a bit spoiled by the good entries and expect this standard throughout. Perhaps, a good editor would have demanded just this kind of consistency.

This review will conclude with two strong recommendations. One, Garland Press should hire better editors and typesetters. After a few pages, one quickly tires of inked-in accent marks, quotation marks used for umlaut signs, and superscripts that run into the line above them. Also, a good editor is necessary for catching all typographical errors that the author and his secretary cannot possibly be responsible for. Two, I strongly recommend using this book. It would be a most useful addition especially to the shelf of one interested in the transition from scribe to printer in English culture. Anyone who is to say a word about Caxton from now on must first consult this text.

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R. HOWARD BLOCH. *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986. Pp. x, 156. \$22.50.

The basic argument of this book, that the fabliaux portray "a universe in which language seems to have lost purchase upon the world" (p. 16), is valuable and appealing to the degree that it addresses certain essential concerns neglected or distorted by earlier studies which perversely insisted on viewing the genre as a reflection of social reality or as an ironic restatement of conventional moral principles. Equally attractive are Bloch's conclusions, that the fabliau corpus exhibits the effects of a pervasive and profound isotopic discordance such as characterizes also the literary world of the joke and the psychological phenomenon of fetishism. What I find

less convincing is the approach adopted for demonstrating the validity of this thesis, the idea that the fabliaux articulate a perceived analogy between the relationship of signifier to signified and that of clothes to the body.

No fabliau text explicitly asserts such an association, but, given the multiplicity and diversity of the fabliaux, the absence of this kind of corroboration does not seriously compromise the argument. Its acceptability depends rather on the persuasiveness of the author's treatment of two related issues. The first concerns the frequency in the texts studied of references to clothes, which exhibit an inadequacy to fit their wearers akin to the incapacity of signifiers to capture the reality of what is signified, and of references to dead bodies or their dismembered parts, which, like the material phenomena of the natural world, attract a variety of disparate designations in an ultimately capricious and aleatory fashion. The second issue concerns the validity of this interpretation of the significance of the clothes and body images. There are problems with both.

In the search for evidence to support his theories about how and what the fabliaux mean, Bloch frequently has recourse to texts which are generally perceived as marginal to the fabliau canon. The introduction deals at length with *Le Roi d'Angleterre et le Jongleur d'Ely*; the first chapter makes similar use of *Le Mantel mautillé*. Neither work appears in the fabliau inventory of Noomen and Boogaard's *Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux*. The same is true for *Audigier, Richeut*, and numerous other pieces whose incorporation into the discussion is defended on the questionable grounds that they appeared in the ancient and notoriously eclectic Barbazan and Méon anthology.

The analogy between signifying reality and clothing the body is established through a promiscuous ransacking of semantic levels. At the most abstract it would appear to depend on some semic opposition of the "container" versus the "contained" type. At the most concrete it is supported by such punning lexemic connotations as that apprehended between *afabler* ("to slip on") and *afabler* ("to narrate"). When the lexemes are textual (the example cited above from p. 23 is not), they are open to the objection that both meanings required to establish the analogy suggested (e.g., *trover*, meaning "to find" or "to compose poetry") are not necessarily realized in the instances selected to support the case. At the other extreme, the problem with the semes "container" versus "contained" is not that they exclude some specific meanings in particular contexts but rather that they are so vaguely comprehensive as to allow a range of possibilities which weaken Bloch's thesis by indefinitely diluting its implications. There are occasions, such as the discussion of a passage in Macrobius (pp. 24–25),

when the clothes-and-body image seems to be just one more example of the *nucleus-cortex* opposition so familiar from traditional medieval allegoresis. And indeed the idea is on more than one occasion admitted that the attitude toward *mimesis* reflected here is "evident across a wide range of generic types . . . including the allegory, lyric, and romance" (p. 60). Bloch defends the theoretical demarcation of his study by claiming that the phenomena with which he is concerned are "particularly well developed" (p. 60) in the fabliaux, which "make explicit what is less focused elsewhere" (p. 34), but quantitative assessments of this sort are obviously difficult to substantiate. There is a real question whether the treatment of literary representation as dealt with in *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* is either particularly scandalous or a specifically fabliau phenomenon.

These doubts and hesitations originate from the fact that Bloch's reading of the fabliaux is itself essentially allegorical. Such a procedure is not only methodologically suspect—in that it involves positing mimetically the terms of an allegory which has the effect of subverting *mimesis*—but also alien to the spirit of a genre which characteristically operates in the mode of literal narrative. There may not be "a meaningful reality beyond fiction" (p. 60), but there are differences between narrative discourses which, when properly apprehended, may guide us to an understanding of the meaning of individual or generically associated texts. Read allegorically, the phallus of *Les trois Dames qui troverent un vit* is one more partial object, engendering as it circulates a series of imperfect meanings and thereby attesting to a general failure of the representational process. However, this interpretation does not mandate an allegorical reading; the conclusion that the *vit* of this fabliau has no referent in the "real" extratextual world emerges from the literal narrative context, where it must satisfy the conditions, among others, of possessing the properties of an *undetached* penis and of being claimed as a doorknocker! Narratives, that is to say, postulate their own material reality in the same way that, with such phrases as "it was now . . .," they postulate their own temporal reality.

I assume that the fabliaux exploit this realization to create a distinctive discourse which can best be understood through comparison with other, different discourses. Bloch assumes that the fabliaux exist in large measure to articulate this same realization in terms comparable to those adopted by other genres. Our positions are sufficiently close that I found *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* an intellectually lively and highly enjoyable treatment of its subject. In Bloch's terms it is perhaps inevitable that the book's relationship

to the materials investigated should be that of another ill-fitting coat. This review, of course, may be similarly related to *its* subject.

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GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO. *Amorosa Visione: Bilingual Edition*. Trans. Robert Hollander, Timothy Hampton, and Margherita Frankel, Intro. by Vittore Branca. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1986. Pp. xxix, 255. \$30.00.

Boccaccio's *Amorosa Visione* sees a worldly dreamer-narrator wandering past *triumphs* of Wisdom, Fame, Wealth, Love, and Fortune before discovering his beloved in a *locus amoenus*; there is a surprise ending. The poem, in fifty cantos of terza rima, is not one of Boccaccio's more accomplished performances. Its ambitions are excessive and contradictory: Boccaccio wants to be a dreamer in the French *dits amoureux* style, a disciple of Dante (who is discovered in the *triumph* of Wisdom), a mythographer (some three hundred exemplary figures are included) and an autobiographical apologist who gazes at his avaricious father, bewails his own poverty, and contemplates the possibility of artistic fame. At its worst the poem bogs down in a welter of catalogues and mechanical formulas: Boccaccio as Lydgate. And its brighter moments come almost as an escape from the higher design; the mythographical material on Jove and Juno, for example, accumulates to form a marital drama that has the comic vigor of a *Decameron novella*. For all its apparent shortcomings, however, this Boccaccian text was immensely successful in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; only the *Decameron* proved more popular.

Petrarch, an early admirer, was inspired to compose his own *Trionfi*. The Boccaccian and Petrarchan poems were subsequently often read as two halves of a diptych. They exerted a powerful and widespread influence on the visual arts, on Italian poets, and, directly or indirectly, on foreign authors such as Christine de Pisan, Chaucer, Stephen Hawes, and Queen Elizabeth I.

Medievalists wishing to consider Chaucer in his European setting will find this new bilingual edition of the *Amorosa Visione* extremely useful.