

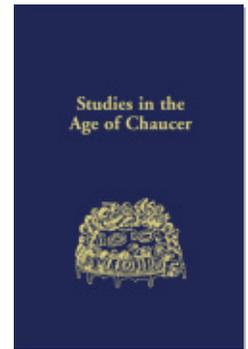


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Chaucer and the Universe of Learning by Ann W. Astell
(review)

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(p. 263; Staley and Aers's emphasis). The balance of this statement, as well as its refusal to respect the old dichotomies between sacred and secular that still structure our field, should inspire much further thinking along the lines pursued here.

Despite the periodic dogmatism of this book, it deserves our admiration for its acute readings of difficult and important texts, for its desire to raise questions as well to settle them (the epilogue indeed lists several such questions) and, above all, for the sheer energy and joy of its approach to its subject matters. The book will probably make some enemies or, at least, confirm old enmities, perhaps most heatedly as a result of its discussions of gender and power, and of its particular brand of Marxist historicism. It remains, though, a wonderfully creative contribution to Middle English studies: a book that has the knack of leaving its readers at once better informed and at the same time freer to pursue their own inquiries into the field, invigorated by what they have learned. If scholarly collaborations are this much fun, and this productive, let us have more of them.

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ANN W. ASTELL. *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996. Pp. xvi, 254. \$35.00.

It is difficult to do justice in a brief review to such a plenitude of learning marshalled in support of a catena of fresh, bold, and provocative arguments. Ann Astell's multifaceted thesis elaborated first in her preface asserts that *The Canterbury Tales* is a *summa* whose social estate exposition in *The General Prologue* is succeeded by a philosophical *summa* in exemplary tales; that the contest of tales mirrors the scholastic *quaestiones* and academic competitions of Chaucer's day; and that the Ellesmere redactor orders the tales into a pattern of planetary descent and ascent which makes of pilgrimage and its roadside entertainment on the bumpy road to Canterbury a smooth philosophical soul-journey through the planetary spheres. All of this constitutes, she argues adroitly, an intellectual dialogue with Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, book

7, and a story-telling contest with Dante's *Paradiso*. The Dantean trace is not new, but the details are fresh and stimulating, and more compelling than the Gower nexus.

The elaboration of her polyform argument occupies an introduction, seven chapters, and a brief conclusion. The introduction argues that Chaucer's intellectual milieu and his audience were neither gentry nor nobility, but a new class of nonclerical clerks consisting of a social intelligentsia in the educated upper-middle class. She points to *The House of Fame* with its naïve narrator as a model for the structure of *The Canterbury Tales*, and points to the fragments or story-block divisions of the *Tales* into which the redactor of the Ellesmere text set the tales in imitation of the planetary scheme of a Macrobian soul and body journey (pp. 27–30).

The first chapter, "Chaucer and The Division of Clerks," argues that the Ellesmere scribe would have us read the *Tales* like the clerks to whom the Parson appeals for correction. Chaucer's own Clerk reflects a "clericized" fourth estate (p. 54), in association with the Knight's *bellatores*, the Plowman's *laboratores*, and the Parson's *oratores*. Other pilgrims, including the Wife of Bath, speak for and as clerks whenever they exhibit their knowledge (p. 59). The second chapter, "The Divisions of Knowledge," announces the Ellesmere *Tales* as a *summa* of analogies between divisions of knowledge and divisions of social estates "as part of a conscious dialogue" among Chaucer and Gower and Dante. In this respect, the *Tales* reopens philosophy, submits Dante's *Paradiso*, brought to earth, to interpretation by the pilgrims, and itself constitutes a *Convivio* that matches branches of Philosophy with planetary spheres in exemplary stories and story blocks (p. 85).

Chapter 3, "From Saturn to the Sun: Planetary Pilgrimage in Fragments I and IX," imitates the tour through the chiasmic order of the tales, whose first fragment rehearses a planetary pilgrimage descending from the Knight's Saturn through the Miller's Jupiter and the Reeve's Mars to the Cook's Sun, all in chiasmic relation with the Manciple's solar ascent in Fragment 9 (p. 92). Chapter 4, "Solar Alchemy in Fragments II and VIII," marks Custance and Cecilia as saints of poverty and faith, and their stories as tensions between the language of alchemy and the Word of God. Chapter 5, "Mercurial Marriage in Fragments III–IV–V: Philosophic Misogamy and the Trivium of Woman's Knowledge"—contrasting philosophic misogamy and the trivium of woman's knowledge—links the Wife, Friar, and Summoner

to Rhetoric, the Clerk and Merchant to Logic, and the Squire and Franklin to (*un*)Grammar (pp. 175–77). Chapter 7, “Lunar ‘Pratique’: Law, Medicine, and Theology in Fragments VI and X,” whose tales of Physician, Pardoner, and Parson expose the lunar practices of law, medicine, and theology, ends the cosmic tour, noting that the lunar fault of the Pardoner’s lapsed memory is countered by the lunar virtue of the Parson’s humility. The conclusion reiterates main lines of argument that the “story block,” or fragment structure of the *Tales*, “is a purposeful *divisio* and *ordinatio*” comprising “structural breaks necessary for topical location, and thus for meaning” (p. 226), and that Chaucer’s choice of a basic ordering principle for the *Tales* is “discoverable and matches that actually in the Ellesmere order” (p. 228).

I cannot but admire Astell’s impressive scholarship in this enterprise. Her arguments are bold and backed by a plethora of evidence. Even if I do not *believe* her argument that the Ellesmere redactor saw and ordered the tales into a two-way journey of the soul within a one-way journey of the body, I can only quibble with inconsequential details and a style of argumentation that occasionally detracts attention. For one example, I see an implicit contradiction between an early supposition that the unity of the *Tales* is “an (unfinished) whole” (p. 14) and her well-made point in the conclusion that Fragment 1 figures a bookish Dantean *compilatio* that informs the planetary pilgrimage of the soul (p. 228). Questions of fact also divert attention. The etymology of *book* is not *birch*, and the etymology for *Leonard* is not a critic’s, but derives from the martyrologists of the *Legenda Aurea*. The division of Oratores, Bellatores, and Laboratores could not have been “first enunciated” in 1030 (pp. 33–34) if Wulfstan’s *Institutes of Polity* listed them earlier. What she means by the “official introduction” to Paris of Aristotle in 1255 escapes me, since Aristotle’s Natural Philosophy was proscribed in 1215, and Francis Bacon had lectured there on Aristotelian philosophy in the 1240s. The curricular Trivium can be traced at least as far back as Alcuin in 787.

Some readings of Chaucer seem suspect. Does Palamon marry Emily in the *same grove* of “gardenlike features” where he fought Arcite (p. 102)? If the Knight’s comparison of his telling task with plowing a field reflects a Saturnian agrarian deity, can one ignore Absolon’s coulter (which in the literature of the day figures the Parson’s tongue sowing seeds of truth) in the tale of the Jovean Miller? If the Man of Law’s Custance is “a cause of conversion for those to whom she is sent” (p. 142), can we ignore God’s voice whose power converts the king and

others in her defense (2.683–86)? Can one say that the summoner of the Friar's tale enters into a pact with "the devil himself" (p. 166), when he is but a single *fiend* (3.1448, 1475, 1506)? If the Ellesmere order is a "right" reading of Chaucer's philosophical intent, is it consonant to cite lines not in the Ellesmere (p. 157)? Finally, while I approve the manuscript form *Custance* in preference to *Constance*, I wonder at nonmanuscript *Cecilia* and *Griselda* in preference to *Cecile* and *Grisild(e)*.

Crucial to the intention attributed to the Ellesmere redactor is the chiasmic arrangement of fragment divisions; but, if Chaucer's fragments represent *divisio*, why did he fail to link 3, 4, and 5 into the single philosophical story-block where Astell places them? Putting her entire chiasmic relationship in question is the fact that there are only eight "structural" breaks in the *Tales* and, hence, nine fragments "necessary for topical location, and thus for meaning." The publisher's presentation of the text is agreeable, though there are repetitions of blanket footnotes and unnecessary appeals to "as readers have noted" (e.g., pp. 136–37). I spotted only one obvious typo—*Sorseynt* Leonard (p. 16).

To my taste, this book is filling of fact and rich of speculation, though I miss the Chaucer who indulges in the pleasure of learning and is joyful in the jest it affords him even with the sentence of the theologians. Saturnine and ludic Chaucers are not incompatible (even Hamlet, short of playmates in the dour courts of Denmark, had his moments of merriment); but, my own idiosyncratic taste must not take attention from the splendid achievement of this book, which will stir debate on many a critical terrain. Above all, Astell is everywhere to be taken seriously. She argues with conviction, commitment, and sincerity.

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CATHERINE BATT, ed. *Essays on Thomas Hoccleve*. Westfield Publications in Medieval Studies, vol. 10. Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London. Turnhout: Brepols, 1996. Pp. ix, 130. Np.

Catherine Batt begins her introduction to this welcome collection with a quote from Hoccleve's *Series* in which the author fears being thought