Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England ed. by Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (review)

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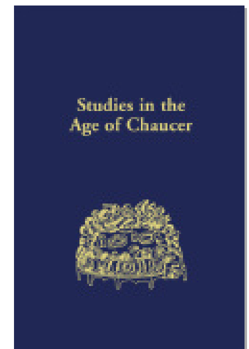

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knowledge of the social distribution and ordering of all the other ideological voices of the era.[2]

There is certainly room in this compact study for such an examination. There are but 182 pages of text, not excluding the lengthy footnotes and copious quotations from Chaucer (in the mediated voice of the Riverside edition). Some chapters are inexplicably short and/or end abruptly: chapters 4 and 7 on the *Knight's Tale* and *Monk's Tale* are barely thirteen and fourteen pages, respectively; a lengthy chapter on *Troilus* stops short while raising the political implications of credulity to refer the reader to an earlier chapter. Chapter 5 on the Wife of Bath's *Prologue* is largely descriptive, despite a provocative opening that analyzes punishments meted out to verbally unruly medieval women (pp. 97–99).

It is a book perhaps overcareful to acknowledge its intellectual debts; Grudin takes great pains to distinguish her ideas from those of previous critics, often employing substantial quotations to demonstrate her points. Primary sources are (nearly always) cited extensively in the original and in translation. Such tactics are laudable in their fairmindedness and scholarly meticulousness, but the voices of Chaucer and the critics become a distracting chorus threatening to drown out the author and her ideas. I would have liked to have heard much more—in her voice.

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BARBARA A. HANAWALT and DAVID WALLACE, eds. *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England.* Medieval Culture Series, vol. 9. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. Pp. xii, 242. $49.95 cloth, $19.95 paper.

This book is essentially a proceedings volume from a 1993 conference at the University of Minnesota. That occasion brought together five literary scholars and five historians in the hope that the intersections of their shared discourse would lead to greater insight not just into the

[2] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259–422; quotation on p. 417.

writings and realities of the later medieval period, but also—and potentially much more importantly—into the ways in which their two disciplines could best contribute to that end. If that hope thus provided the subtitle for the present collection, it seems potentially ominous that Ralph Hanna's first chapter should start things off with the less-than-optimistic observation that in a modern highway system intersections are likely to prove the frequent site of "collisions and accidents, often of the mortal variety (p.1)." Happily, though, conference respondent Paul Strohm uses the book's "Afterward" to close on a more hopeful note, one that stresses that in the medieval experience such intersections were much more often, and surely more congenially, "a *carrefour*: a crossroad or market square, a place where roads converge and persons with different origins and destinations tarry for purposes of acquaintance and exchange (p. 223)." Between these two extremes come nine other essays or chapters, each of which serves to illustrate the metaphorical truth of either the Hanna or the Strohm thesis—and sometimes both.

If the work manages to cover a wide range of topics, the subjects discussed appear to have been selected with an interdisciplinary focus in mind. That is, one suspects that students of literature could endlessly address the uses of metaphor without provoking a historical response just as historians could explore the niceties of the wool staple without eliciting much literary reaction. Such purely disciplinary concerns are avoided here presumably because they would not have encouraged the kind of mutual exploration that was the original conference's intent, the kind of dialogue out of which adherents of each discipline would come better to understand not only what the other had to offer on its own terms, but also how that discipline could fruitfully be employed to enrich the understandings of their own.

In practice, however, the literary critics speak much more frequently to that intent than do the historians (and that is a comment made by one who has long professed both History and Comparative Literature). The problem, of course, is that whereas contemporary literary studies place great emphasis on theory, much of it stressing the indeterminacy of texts, in most instances history does no such thing. Rather, for the most part its practitioners continue to assume that theirs is a world of fact, not fictions, and hence that the past has some kind of objective reality. That belief makes their first task one of determining what "the true facts" are, and, because facts are facts, or so they allege, they tend violently to reject any objections posed by mere theory. Only in the next stage, the creation of historical narrative, are they willing to admit the

possibility that the very process of selecting the supposedly important facts—and then of searching out (some would say inventing) the patterns to which they give rise—may be purely interpretive and hence subject to all the uncertainties that modern theory has brought to the study of literature. Thus, even though the historian's factual knowledge is usually derived from texts, scholars of history are likely to respond to theories of textual indeterminacy much as the very literary Dr. Johnson did to Bishop Berkeley's doubts about the universe: not with reasoned logic, but with a swift and vigorous kick. Purely rhetorical though such kicks may be, they are not the stuff out of which fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue is likely to arise.

That observation goes far beyond what any historian claims explicitly here, but the tendency is surely present and goes far toward explaining why *Bodies and Disciplines* is a book in which the literary types have more useful things to say to the historians than those historians have to say in return. For example, in "Brewing Trouble: On Literature and History—and Alewives," Ralph Hanna takes on what he calls "the fine historical work" of Judith Bennett, in particular the way it uses specifics taken from the fictive texts of literature to document what she insists were the misogynistic realities actually experienced by all alewives. Deconstructing these texts as most literary critics would, Hanna soon arrives at rather different conclusions, much more tentative and far less misogynistic.

Whether Hanna is right in his own views about "the tavern as feminized space (p. 1)" matters much less than does his theoretical point, one that should concern all historians, not just Bennett; she is, after all, hardly alone in her willingness to employ literature as a source of historical information. Without such usage, most social history as we now know it would become little more than a pale imitation of its former self. In illustration of the point, all one has to do is to consider what would happen to the work of Barbara Hanawalt, when, in chapter 8, "'The Childe of Bristowe' and the Making of Middle-Class Adolescence," she argues: "The game of exchange between the literary and the historical leads to a fifteenth-century construction of adolescence (p. 155)." Given the claims of earlier historians that adolescence was purely a modern invention, that is potentially an enormously significant conclusion, but it would fade into nothingness were she and every other historian to be denied all use of the literary.

That, obviously, was not Hanna's intent. Rather, his call was more for a historical methodology not blindly insensitive to the nuanced

uncertainties inherent in the literary enterprise. That, surely, is not too much to ask. At the same time, though, whether historians respond or not, *Bodies and Disciplines* suggests that as literary studies move more fully to embrace the new historicism, they would do well to ponder the extent to which modern approaches to texts may have undermined the uses to which they put historical findings or, conversely, the extent to which the way they use those findings may implicitly suggest certain caveats about when and where indeterminacy is to be found. That is, as more than a few of the book's chapters demonstrate, new historicists tend to claim that their readings take on added dimensions and depth when the literature with which they are concerned is placed in its proper historical context. Thus, to illustrate, in "Ritual, Theater, and Social Space in the York Corpus Christi Cycle" Sarah Beckwith is at pains to show the extent to which particular scenes take on added resonance when the reader or viewer is made fully aware of just where in York those scenes were meant to be performed: what buildings stood in close proximity, what people either dwelt or worked therein, and what other people one might have expected to encounter outside of them at the time when the plays were written.

As Beckwith's notes demonstrate, these points depend either on her own research into the relevant historical records or on information to be found in works by modern historians. In other words, to make this argument she is proceeding very much as any historian would and, in so doing, she is privileging certain text-based claims as though they were objective facts, the existence of which cannot be brought into doubt through use of the usual deconstructive techniques. Nor is she wrong in so doing, the point being that some facts are more equal than other facts, an Orwellian distinction that both historians and literary critics can all too often overlook, to the detriment of their work. But the shadings here *are* difficult. When a historian states that John was the third of the Plantagenet kings, most people are likely to accept that claim as fact even though they may know that "Plantagenet" was a term introduced only later. On the other hand, while A. A. Milne's proposition—"King John was not a good man / He had his little ways"—may attract the same kind of near-universal acceptance, its existence as a fact is much more problematic because John's character is purely a humanly observed attribute and therefore a subject of at least potential debate. That makes its objective reality much more tenuous than John's numerical position among the Plantagenets, a position that cannot be changed by differing attitudes toward the man. Clearly, too, Beckwith's

specifics about fifteenth-century York partake of this same kind of meta-attitudinal facticity.

What these musings suggest is that, maddeningly unreflective though historians can be, their very pragmaticism may have correctives to offer to what one may confidently assume most students of history see as the excesses of modern theoretical assumptions about the nature of texts that, like Bishop Berkeley, can come dangerously close to denying extramental existence in its entirety. This is, however, a Johnsonian subject on which the five historians of *Bodies and Disciplines* are disappointingly silent. Although reviewers are always supposed to review the book before them, not the one that they might have preferred, in the present instance it seems clear that if each chapter from one discipline had been followed by a direct comment from the other, participants and readers alike would have better been able to see the ways in which history and literary studies operating in tandem can produce more lastingly fruitful results than can either of them working in splendid isolation. In short, Hanna's fatality-strewn intersection would have truly become Strohm's life-enhancing *carrefour*.

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RALPH HANNA III. *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts. Figurae*: Reading Medieval Culture Series. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996. Pp. x, 362. $39.50.

SETH LERER, ed. *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology: The Legacy of Erich Auerbach. Figurae*: Reading Medieval Culture Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. Pp. xii, 301. $45.00.

Pursuing history or challenging history: what's your preference? And is there a difference, for may not any pursuit be also a challenge? Two books, both in the same Stanford series on "reading medieval culture" (with, in the case of Lerer's collection, the added rhetorical convenience that the series uses the same trope of tropes—*figura*—that provoked and animated the career of Erich Auerbach); two books examining the function of history and historiography at a time when it has again become critically fashionable to do so; two books that are both *collectanea* or *florilegia,*