Still Thriving: On the Importance of Aranye Fradenburg


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During the mid-1990s as a Teaching Assistant at the University of California in Santa Barbara, I had an experience I wish all medievalists could have: listening to a large lecture course on the Canterbury Tales delivered by Aranye (then Louise) Fradenburg. I was drawn to Santa Barbara’s PhD program because of Arayne’s astonishing oppositional readings of the Wife of Bath’s Tale, the Prioress’s
Tale, the Manciple’s Tale and other texts.\(^1\) But little did I know the knowledge I would gain from her accessible yet unfailingly brilliant undergraduate lectures on Chaucer. One such lecture was on the Nun’s Priest’s Tale. We are accustomed to think of that text as Chaucer’s most slippery tale. In Charles Muscatine’s classic formulation, “the shifting style and the succession of topics” covered by Chaucer “never rest long enough to serve a single view or a single doctrine or an unalterable judgment.”\(^2\) More recently but in a similar vein, Peter Travis writes that the tales Menippean satire tends “to unravel and deconstruct the totalizing patterns of thinking that are distinctive to certain traditional discourses,” so much so that it seems “absolutely unreadable.”\(^3\) Aranye, however, located at the core of the tale a single interpretation, one that distilled for Santa Barbara students the stakes of this challenging narrative. In keeping with the coincidence of her lecture with Thanksgiving break—a holiday centered on eat-

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\(^3\) Peter Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading the Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 340.
ing a bird—she pointed out to the class how Chaucer, in narrating Chanticleer’s escape from the fox, tells a tale about how not to be eaten. Like latter-day beast fables about Bugs Bunny or the Road Runner, the Nun’s Priest’s Tale is about nothing less than staying alive. Chanticleer, moreover, emerges from his ordeal a better, cannier, and more clear-sighted bird than before, having learned from his encounter with the fox to no longer allow flattery to fool him.

Chanticleer’s experience is a lesson Chaucerians might take to heart, as we all are faced right now with a direct threat to Chaucer’s institutional valuation by “the world’s largest scholarly society in the humanities,” the Modern Language Association. Recently the MLA has proposed lumping all three medieval English MLA divisions into one “Early English” division, a move that would eliminate the current division on Chaucer. The MLA’s effort to consolidate English divisions (in both medieval and other periods) appears to be motivated by a desire for institutional vitality based upon a commendably progressive and liberal multiculturalism. A March 28, 2013 email sent to the Chaucer Division executive committee by MLA President Marianne Hirsch and MLA First Vice President Margaret Ferguson alludes to “the disproportionate number of divisions in English in relation to other fields like African and East

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Asian,“ and to possible “new comparative divisions on hemispheric, Atlantic, Mediterranean, Pacific, Indian Ocean, and indigeneity.” In her presidential column in the Summer 2013 MLA Newsletter, Hirsch writes that she finds “the MLA’s imperial ‘of America’ troubling and the split between English and ‘foreign’ languages frustrating.”5 Hirsch’s references in the letter to the fact that “the humanities are neglected and underfunded in the age of economic globalization” and to “numerous planetary networks of intellectual exchange” the MLA has yet to engage, makes explicit a theory of how a more democratic and inclusive attention to “underrepresented world languages” would enliven and enrich an MLA suffering from widespread austerity policies.6

There is much to commend in Hirsch’s proposal. But should she bemoan the gap between English and “foreign” languages? Is Hirsch correct to desire a thriving international MLA multitude? Following Alain Badiou’s critique of Gilles Deleuze (the “philosopher of the thriving rhizomatic multitude”), Slavoj Žižek has queried the embrace in recent decades of a proliferation of diverse subjectivities, political and sexual.7 Žižek points out that “apropos of today’s multicultural-

5 Hirsch, “Of America.”
6 Hirsch, “Of America.”
7 Slavoj Žižek, Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion (London: Verso, 2002), 269.
ist celebration of the diversity of lifestyles, . . . this thriving of differences relies on an underlying One: on the radical obliteration of Difference, of the antagonistic gap.”

To posit a thriving proliferation of linguistic positions, that is, is to create a medium or container whose absence of antagonism—a supposed easy-going roominess—allows all those positions to circulate, but also obliterates the dyad or binary necessary to engage difference. The proliferation of multiplicity and diversity ultimately leads us to sameness and similitude. I cite Žižek’s critique of the thriving multicultural multitude, not because I am against multiculturalism and diversity, but because I think that the thriving of the academy depends upon its retention of a searching analytical approach. As the MLA expands—and of course it should—to encompass an ever more diverse and larger number of literary perspectives, it’s crucial to approach those literatures with not so much a celebratory but a critical eye.

Why, though, should Chaucer stay alive? How might the Nun’s Priest’s Tale provide us with a rationale for retaining the MLA Chaucer division? We might respond to such questions by demonstrating how the father of English poetry anticipates the very proliferation of difference Hirsch seeks. We could highlight, for example, the linguistic heterogeneity of the tale, which mixes Latin maxims and Old French interjections into its

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8 Žižek, Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?, 238.
Middle English. And, following the lead of critics like Peter Travis, we could cite other multiplicities present in the tale. This most self-conscious of narratives contains aspects of virtually all of the other Canterbury Tales; immanent in the tale is a heterogeneous crowd of possible perspectives, valences, subjectivities and organisms (from humans to birds, butterflies and even mermaids). But contrary to Travis, I would like to return to Fradenburg’s insight and ask if the slippery multiplicity of the Nun’s Priest’s Tale is the means by which Chaucer the poet—like the cock—stays alive? If, as Fradenburg puts it, sovereignty can deploy “multiplicity and difference” to “compel multiple desires to gather round its splendor,” is the Nun’s Priest’s Tale the prime instance of a Chaucerian poetic sovereignty (or sovereign multitude) around which fascinated scholars have long gathered?9

In other words, we shouldn’t retain the Chaucer Division because of the splendor attached to the medieval writer as the father of English poetry. Neither should we enshrine Chaucer for how progressive—how proto-liberal or proto-multicultural—his poetry is. Rather, by critically analyzing Chaucer and his oeuvre, we discover its function as a goad to rethinking pressing questions about identity and alterity. Aranye has modeled such an approach through her oppositional criticism of,

for example, anti-Semitism and the Prioress; or class, gender and capitalism and the Wife of Bath. As such groundbreaking essays affirm, we should retain Chaucer insofar as critical—not celebratory—attention to his corpus continues to unhinge, transform, and trouble received ideas about being in the world, both then and now.