Dark Chaucer: An Assortment

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Myra Seaman, et al.
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Prefatory Note

. . . there is no escape from history into romance.
~Lee Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History

. . . stultus in tenebras ambulat [the fool walks in darkness]
~Ecclesiastes 2:14

. . . by the shadow he took his wit
~Chaucer, The Man of Law’s Tale

This little book had its genesis over a dinner shared with friends — Nicola Masciandaro, Öykü Tekten, Karl Steel, and Eileen Joy — in a restaurant in Brooklyn on April Fool’s Day in 2011, the same day that saw the launch of punctum books. As we were sharing some food and wine and joking around about this and that, Nicola mentioned that he had always wanted to write a book or edit a collection of essays that would focus on all of the dark and melancholic places in Chaucer (of which there are many, once you start paying attention), and while teaching Chaucer over the years, he has been collecting these dark moments in his head and ruminating them like small black pearls. This also recalled to Nicola how frequently Lee Patterson uses the term “dark” in his book Chaucer and the Subject of History. Chaucer is, of course, widely beloved for his playfulness and comic sensibility, but his poetry is also rife with scenes and events and passing, brief instances where everything could possibly
go horribly wrong or where everything that matters seems, if even momentarily, altogether and irretrievably lost. And then sometimes, things really do go wrong.

It struck us that evening that in order to do justice to these moments, which are more numerous than you realize when you start looking for them, that you would have to be willing to fall into these abyssal passages without ropes and without worrying how everything ultimately turns out (this would be a rogue journey against the teleological tides of the narratives and over the beachheads of certain comforting scholarly “resolutions”). The idea would be to undertake something like soundings in the darker recesses of the Chaucerian lakes and to bring back palm- or bite-sized pieces (black jewels) of bitter Chaucer that could be shared with others — an “assortment,” if you will. It could be productive (and hell, interesting), we thought, to gather together some shipmates who would be willing to explore Chaucer’s darker topographies, and even get lost there, not so much making sense of these dark passages, or referring them to how things ultimately turn out, but rather, making them more rich and more strange, like the pearls that were in Alonso’s eyes as he sank to the bottom of Shakespeare’s ocean in *The Tempest*. Myra Seaman stepped in to help steer; others were impressed into service.

Opting to dilate rather than cordon off this darkness, this volume assembles a variety of attempts to follow such moments into their folds of blackness and horror, to chart their endless sorrows and recursive gloom . . . as if there were no way (back) out. Not that this collection finds only emptiness and non-meaning there. You never know what you will discover in the dark.

_Eileen A. Joy and Nicola Masciandaro_  
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