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Chaucer's Queer Poetics: Rereading the Dream Trio

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"Rather than meanings as products that can be neatly extracted from a performed text and paraphrased," de Looze writes, "meaning is understood now as process—as a challenge to the reader to grapple with the text and try to understand" (224). This is a productive line of inquiry, and de Looze makes his case eloquently and convincingly.

This book is thoroughly researched and is itself quite a scholarly "performance." Occasionally the repeated use of the active voice to describe "performing" manuscripts can appear somewhat forced, but this is a matter of little consequence. The work makes a substantial contribution to Juan Manuel studies and, more generally, to medieval and Hispanic scholarship.

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Chaucer's Queer Poetics: Rereading the Dream Trio. *Susan Schibanoff.* Toronto and Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2006. Pp. viii+365.

"Queer": in contemporary critical parlance, it can denote homosexuality or just about anything else that subverts ideological constructions of cultural normativity. Queer theory, having been detached from a de facto correlation with the love that dare not speak its name, now invites readers to consider the ways in which normative and nonnormative identities are constructed within intersecting cultural frameworks of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other factors. But does "queer" denote "French"? As Susan Schibanoff demonstrates throughout *Chaucer's Queer Poetics*, the critical history of Chaucerian studies has used "French" as an ambiguous marker for all that Chaucer supposedly surpassed as he metamorphosed from a hack writer mired in moribund courtly traditions into the Father of English Literature, as evidenced by the raucous and insistently masculine *Canterbury Tales*.

For Schibanoff, then, "queer" marks the ways in which geographical boundaries establish norms of cultural and poetic identity, and this paradigm provides a model for reassessing the trite encapsulation of Chaucer's career as veering away from French influence into his own voice—one that, not coincidentally, asserts English poetic liberation. If Schibanoff's book addressed this topic alone, it would be an invaluable contribution to both Chaucerian studies and queer theory. It shows the ways in which Francophobia joins homophobia in the English critical tradition, thereby expanding the field of queer theory to take into account the way in which geographical differences can become conflated with suspicions of sexual otherness. Another of Schibanoff's most powerful reading strategies is her theorization of the queer decoy, who serves

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as the "spectre of the queer male other" (28) to establish the normativity of another character. This model of reading queer relationships insightfully builds on past notions of the erotic triangle, especially Eve Sedgwick's foundational work in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

But there is ever so much more in this rich and intellectually generous book, particularly in Schibanoff's reading of medieval poetics as an inherently queer—and queering—mode of creation. She tackles the Greek concept of hylomorphism, which proposes that "all substances (natural or physical bodies) are composed of both matter and form," and demonstrates how this concept generated "the 'paternal' or 'patriarchal' poetic of the Middle Ages in which the author 'fathered' the poem by forming passive and inchoate matter into the verbal artefact" (14–15). From this perspective, poetry is inherently a masculine domain, yet poetics cannot be effectively contained within the gender system that is ostensibly at its root. Schibanoff's strengths as a reader are evident in her ability to pinpoint the contradictions in hylomorphic poetics. For example, the figure of Nature simply carries too many significations—as that which is natural and as that which should be natural, for example. In light of these conflicting expectations, who is Nature? For Schibanoff, she is a lesbian: "Nature is decidedly a woman, a female personification with a woman's body, yet she is a woman who acts like a man by wielding the metaphorical masculine instruments of copulation: hammer and stylus. By classical and medieval standards, this makes Nature a lesbian, a woman who would perform as a man sexually through the use of a surrogate male phallus" (216–17).

From these foundations, Schibanoff creates a scholarly triptych, with each part addressing a Chaucerian dream vision: *Book of the Duchess* (ca. 1368–72), *House of Fame* (ca. 1379–80), and *Parliament of Fowls* (ca. 1381–82). The narrator of *Book of the Duchess* serves as the queer foil to the Black Knight, thus relieving the courtly protagonist of effeminate traces due to his position in the suspect realm of French manners. In *House of Fame*, Geoffrey as narrator relives Ganymede's aquiline rapture into homoerotic service and highlights the poetic challenge of translating classical sources into vernacular poetry. *Parliament of Fowls* suppresses male antagonism through its refiguring of Nature as a lesbian and its privileging of female desire, and yet again Chaucer's narrator plays with the queer potential of telling a love story as a failed—queer(ed)—lover. These brief summaries cannot do full justice to Schibanoff's scintillating analyses, which carefully and cogently work through multiple historical and literary sources—from Orderic's condemnation of men's fashions to conflicting visions of Priapus—to establish the cultural context of her queer readings.

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My only criticism of *Chaucer's Queer Poetics* is actually a compliment: Schibanoff's title inadequately reflects the scope of her argument. One might readily assume that this book is primarily directed at Chaucerians, but medievalists of all stripes need to take into account her analysis of the queer potential of poetics—not just Chaucerian poetics—within the wide field of the western Middle Ages. In this review I have concentrated on her theoretical perspective and her readings of Chaucer's works, but the chapters addressing the literary background that makes possible Chaucer's queer poetics—including "What Dante Meant to Chaucer: The Hermaphrodite Poetics of the *Divine Comedy*" and "Disorderly Nature: Aristotle, Alan of Lille, and Jean de Meun"—are in themselves significant contributions to our understanding of the tense dialectics among language, poetry, and narrative identity. I fear that Schibanoff's title might ward off some readers who would profit from understanding how queerness operates in the constitution of heterosexual identity in the Middle Ages.

Chaucer's Queer Poetics expands the field of the queer in a manner that is intellectually profound while simultaneously highlighting the potential of queer theory as a recuperative reading practice. Anyone who would shrug off a reading of Nature as reflective of lesbian desire does so at the peril of overlooking the internal inconsistencies at the heart of the gendered paradigms of medieval thought. With readings that are curiouser and curiouser yet all the while meticulously grounded in detailed analysis of the internal contradictions medieval poets seemingly could not avoid, Schibanoff expands the range of the queer to unveil a startling vista of Chaucerian scholarship mired in implicit Francophobia. To answer the question with which this review began—does "queer" mean "French"?—the answer, in the hands of a reader as sophisticated as Schibanoff, is that it certainly can. Any scholar of queer theory and medieval culture must now understand how and why French has represented all that Chaucer ostensibly overcame to achieve his naturalized position as the progenitor of English literature.

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Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England. *Katherine C. Little.* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. Pp. vii+196.

This concise study explores the impact of Wycliffite challenges to auricular confession on the development of selfhood or discourses of the "interior." In response to Michel Foucault's well-known history of con-

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