

praising the multiplicity of the past, adding another important strand to this various and engaging anthology. As an Anglo-Saxonist myself, I found it often salutary and sobering, but also full of unexpected and delightful snippets of information, rare angles of vision, and incisive cultural commentary. This is a collection that should indeed reach out across disciplinary divides and invite other scholars to grapple with the idea that is Anglo-Saxon England.

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Sheila Delany, *The Naked Text: Chaucer's 'Legend of Good Women.'* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, x + 259 pp.

Sheila Delany's critical voice has been a powerful presence for the past three decades—restive, aggressive, and intelligently committed to providing historicized readings to a wide variety of medieval and early modern texts. The publication of *The Naked Text* is thus a significant event, not only because another major book from Delany has appeared, but because it focuses upon an important and somewhat under-studied Chaucerian poem. Often skipped over in a typical Chaucer survey, *The Legend of Good Women* is quite possibly Chaucer's most straightforward take on the "woman question." With its dream-vision Prologue focusing on the vocation of the poet, the *Legend* is a collection of classical female *vitae* written putatively on command because of Chaucer's alleged misrepresentation of women in *Troilus and Criseyde*. These legends of "secular saints" thus pose a basic question of considerable significance to readers of this journal. Is Chaucer a friend of woman; or, as Delany puts it, does the *Legend* "offer a new dignity to women, or is it more of the same old thing?" (p. 8).

Delany is in fact not very interested in answering questions such as these if they are asked in political or cultural isolation. Rather, as she explains in her "Prolocutory," her book is committed to unpacking the poem's overall ideology—an ideology defined broadly enough so as to include such interrelated issues as "sex and gender," "language and nature," "philosophy and theology," "reading and writing," "hagiography and classical literature," "English intellectual life and English foreign policy" (p. 2). Delany's central metaphor is the "naked text," a richly-defined term she deftly employs to explicate a variety of Chaucerian stratagems: mostly notably, a philosophical position that uncovers the constructedness of femininity and thus the "the impossibility of nakedness";

and an aesthetic procedure whereby the minimalist topos of “the woman faithful in love” is seen to be clothed over with numerous layers of cultural sign-systems. Rich, eclectic, and in some places slightly uneven, *The Naked Text* is nevertheless a brilliant performance: the best book-length study of *The Legend of Good Women*, both its local insights and its critical practice provide a salutary challenge to every medieval literary scholar.

Chapter 1, “Reading and Writing,” opens with a series of brief critiques of Chaucer’s early poems—“The Book of the Duchess,” “The House of Fame,” “The Parliament of Fowles,” “Anelida and Arcite,” and *Troilus and Criseyde*—critiques which focus on the gradual “hardening” of Chaucer’s narrator/persona from a passive reader of events to a more active writer/interpreter. Even though her critiques of these poems are sometimes extremely brief, Delany finds room for several interesting side-explorations. One humorous example is the way she successfully desentimentalizes the presumed grief of John of Gaunt in “The Book of the Duchess”: “I am not convinced that the interest of the poem has anything to do with Blanche” (p. 19). Chapter 1’s second half opens with an extensive review of the debate concerning the two versions of the *Prologue to the Legend of Good Women*: in this “metacritical exercise” Delany powerfully demonstrates how the arguments in defense of the compositional priority and aesthetic primacy of the F-text are no more, and no less, persuasive than those of the G-text. The chapter concludes with a corollary exercise where questions of epistemological uncertainty found in the Prologue are aligned with other forms of fourteenth-century “empirical” and “idealist” skepticism. (In her concluding chapter, Delany characterizes *The Naked Text* as a “long-deferred sequel” to her 1972 book *Chaucer’s House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*).

Chapter 2, “Women, Nature, and Language,” focuses on the “imbricated relationship” of women, nature, and language in Chaucer’s “poetic credo,” the *Prologue to the Legend of Good Women*. Delany’s exploration of this semiotic triangle is nothing short of stunning: after reviewing the philosophical *crise de signification* in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century analyses of language, she shows how Chaucer uses language itself to critique the traditional signifier/signified equation of “woman” with “nature.” In this regard the figure of “Eros,” Delany’s pejorative name for the God of Love, proves to be the object of sustained critical attack. In demanding an unbalanced representation of women (every woman must be good, at least in literature), he breaks a “representational troth, the bond between signifier and signified” (p. 82). Standing as a contrast to Eros’ self-destructive essentializings is the complex and ambiguous figure of Alceste. First providing an astute scholarly review of classical representations of Alceste (most notably Euripedes’), Delany evaluates the character of Chaucer’s Alceste as “balanced, objective, and controlled. It is as if Chaucer intends to prove that he can indeed portray a good woman—when he wants to” (p. 105).

Chapter 3, "The Naked Text," is the first of three chapters that address the legends themselves. Delany begins with an elegant study of the tradition of the Thisbe story (one of the many unexpected delights of *The Naked Text* is Delaney's supple readings of Chaucer's sources). The most striking part of the chapter, however, is a section entitled "The Logic of Obscenity," wherein all ten legends are minutely scrutinized for their erotic puns and other forms of camouflaged sexual wordplay. Not all readers will be persuaded by every example Delany prises out (I took exception on two or three occasions). But the undercurrent of sexual innuendo Delany discovers in most (but not all) the legends is, in my judgment, incontrovertibly *there*. Especially enjoyable is Delany's counter-reading of the extended sea-battle in the Cleopatra legend as an all-out sexual tussle. Equally brilliant is her good ear for Middle English homophones, such as her hearing the near-identical sounds of "fyken" (fought) and "fikken" (fucked). But the most important part of this section is Delany's explication of the implicit ideology of Chaucer's obscenities, a politics of humor which proves not to be sexist but rather pro-feminist: "Slicing through the vapid formulae of courtly love with surgical astringency, dissolving the whitewashed version of womanhood that the Narrator had been ordered to produce, obscenity helps to reestablish what I believe Chaucer considered a healthier equilibrium: a more balanced, accurate, and 'natural' view of women than could be provided by either courtly love or its inverse, clerical misogyny" (p. 139).

A central concern of Chapter 4, "Difference and Same," is the importance of Orientalism in *The Legend of Good Women*, for many of the women in the legends are "oriental"—Cleopatra, Thisbe, and Dido, most notably. Delany provides a brief overview of European involvements (political, military, economic) with the "Middle-Eastern, non-European Mediterranean or northern African foreigner" (p. 165) and a summary of fourteenth-century English debates about the value of crusades into the East, be they "nationalistic" (the prevailing French model) or privately financed (the English model). In the legends themselves, Delany suggests, the site of the orient serves as a "rhetorical device" enabling Chaucer "to create a moral structure in the poem" as well as "to offer a veiled commentary on some aspects of English foreign policy" (p. 173).

The final chapter of *The Naked Text*, "A Gallery of Women," runs through all the legends again (Cleopatra, Thisbe, Dido, Hysipyle and Medea, Lucrece, Ariadne, Philomela, Phyllis, Hypermnestra), this time focusing on their "explorations of sex and gender: how sexuality, mediated by language, subjectivity, money, or literary tradition, becomes gender; how it may relate to political power; where art enters the picture" (p. 188). In part because it is a miscellany of aperçus, this final chapter is a bit of a let-down, petering out as it progresses. It is in her "Semi-Polemical Conclusion" that Delany provides closure, offering an unsentimental and somewhat stark assessment of Chaucer's place in his

cultural/political landscape. On the Orientalism question, for instance, Chaucer's "frame of mind" is judged to be "national-patriotic" and "conservative." This "general conservatism," grounded in a "Pauline-Augustinian orthodoxy," sets very real limits to other matters related to the text, most notably the notion of a "Chaucerian ideological openness or 'friendliness' to women" (p. 232). For all of its complexity, Delany is persuaded, Chaucer's attitude toward women remained profoundly ambivalent: "Our discomfort with such ambivalence is all to the good, provided we do not attempt to dispel it by rewriting the past" (p. 240).

In my judgment, *The Naked Text* should be required reading for all scholars interested in medieval literature, in feminism, and in historicism. Delany's critical approach is remarkably her own: pledging no allegiance to any feminist agenda, keeping her marxist persuasions very much in reserve, she has striven to critique the meta-language of Chaucer's narratives in terms that honor the time and place of their construction. If such an undertaking means Chaucer proves to be less of a friend (or enemy) to women than we would wish, so be it. Rather than "rewriting the past," Delany concludes, the best kind of politics is meant "to rewrite the future," and this is "not a merely literary task" (p. 240).

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