

Middle English Marvels: Magic, Spectacle, and Morality in the Fourteenth Century, by Tara Williams. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018. Pp. 176. ISBN: 9780271079639.

Tara Williams's *Middle English Marvels* provides a thorough study of the marvelous in fourteenth-century literature, using a specific subset of marvelous bodies, events, and transformations to explore late-medieval questions of morality. The dual potentiality of marvels in the medieval era, according to Williams, was laden both with possibility and anxiety, a potentiality that allowed space for both wonder and moral reflection. In this study, Williams defines "marvel" broadly, drawing on Jacques Le Goff to support her use of "marvel" rather than "magic" and her definition of the marvelous as encompassing the technological, natural, and supernatural wonders upon which the study centers. Drawing on *Sir Orfeo*, *Lybeaus Desconus*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Canterbury Tales*, along with work from a veritable host of scholars, Williams argues that these specific fourteenth-century texts "represent a coherent and previously unrecognized theory of the marvelous, one focused on the intersection of the magical, the spectacular, and the moral. This theory posits that magical spectacles can provoke forms of wonder that lead to moral actions by characters and open up moral reflection for the audience, particularly on the limits and limitations of ethical systems" (1).

Williams lays out her argument in four chapters, each focused on a different text and form of marvel. These chapters transition smoothly from one focus to another, with each chapter picking up a minor theme from the previous chapter and expanding upon it. Her first chapter, "Mirroring Otherworlds: Fairy Magic, Wonder, and Morality," focuses on the marvel of fairy magic and uses the tale of *Sir Orfeo* to explore the ways in which fairy magic can be used to probe questions of moral codes. In *Sir Orfeo*, marvels raise questions of morality through their revelatory potential, through providing a spectacular (and thus memorable) mirror in the form of Heurodis's body. The second chapter, "Revealing Spectacles: Virtue and Identity in Fair Unknowns," turns from moral codes to individual moral character and the role of marvels, particularly unknown and monstrous maidens, in exposing the character of the protagonist. This chapter draws on the popular Middle English Arthurian romance *Lybeaus Desconus* to consider the vital role of the marvelous in answering questions of Lybeaus's worth and identity. Williams argues that it is only through the marvel of the mysterious maiden and her transformation that the tale can be concluded and the virtue of the protagonist revealed. This chapter also explores questions of identity,

interrogating, like the Middle English text, the relationship between personal virtue, appearance, and identity. In chapter three, “Moving Marvels: Action and Agency in Courtly Spectacles,” Williams shifts to a discussion of the role of marvel in interrogating the nature of virtue itself, beginning with an expanded discussion of the marvelous mechanical angel involved in the coronation of Richard II before entering into an extended investigation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This chapter is perhaps the heart of Williams’s book, appropriate in that *Sir Gawain*, within her framework, “represents the zenith of the visual marvel in the fourteenth century. In their animation, recurrence, and divided agency, its marvels are more complex and detailed than those that come before. The marvels are also moving in other senses; they affect not only Gawain and the Round Table, but also the audience, raising questions about the Arthurian community and its knightly ideals” (96). The interrogations of moral codes and individual virtue in the previous two chapters come together with an interrogation of virtue itself in this complex chapter with as many moving elements as Richard II’s mechanical angel. In her fourth and final chapter, “Talking Magic: Chaucer’s Spectacles of Language,” Williams shifts from considering the moral questions raised by the marvels to considering the “secular marvels” of the *Canterbury Tales*, a text that, unlike the previous three texts, obscures the visual representation of marvels and replaces the visual marvel with the verbal marvel. This different form of the marvelous, in which speech serves as spectacle and space for moral and ethical reflection, is both distinctive to Chaucer and in line with the broader use of marvels in Middle English romances. The very absence of visual spectacle forces audiences to engage in different ways with the same questions of morality, ethics, and virtue explored in the more dramatic visual spectacles of other Middle English texts. In the conclusion, Williams provides final reflections on her topic, gestures toward the changes brought about in discussions of marvel and morality with the fifteenth century, and offers brief suggestions for future study.

One of the strengths of Williams’s book is the ways in which she seamlessly weaves theory and scholarship with close readings of her texts. Her extended dialogue with the works of Caroline Walker Bynum and Jane Bennett throughout the entire monograph gives the text both continuity and rich theoretical grounding, while her discussions of scholarship on marvel and the miraculous highlight the original contributions she is making in this work. Discussions of other scholarship more specific to each chapter, such as her exploration of the monstrous in chapter two and of visuality in chapter three, add additional depth. This extensive theoretical work is paired with engaging close readings of the

texts, contextualized within scholarship on each text and within their literary contexts. Contemporary texts from the same genre are considered alongside the key text for each chapter, highlighting the ways in which Williams's example texts are both representative and uniquely suited to explore the topics at hand. This careful and meticulous scholarly work makes Williams' theoretical framework convincing and clearly demonstrates the significance of her argument. However, for a work that revolves not simply around the marvelous, but also to a large degree around bodies, these bodies are rarely discussed explicitly as gendered ones. For example, even in her chapter on the fair unknown, the key focus is on the monstrous and marvelous. But it seems the fact that many of these marvelous or monstrous bodies (indeed, if not almost all of them) were gendered bears more explicit and extended discussion than that currently offered. However, to fully consider gender, morality, and the marvelous within these texts would be a massive undertaking. Perhaps this is one of the directions for future study made possible by Williams's theoretical framing of these significant themes, questions, and texts.

Lynneth J. Miller
Anderson University (SC)