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Review Essay: Robert R. Edwards, *The Dream of Chaucer: Representation and Reflection in the Early Narratives*

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BOOK REVIEWS

apothecaries) would prevent the injury and debilitation caused by quacks and ill-trained medical personnel. Not surprisingly, though, the results were somewhat different from those anticipated.

If followed strictly, the provisions of the *Furs* would have kept all Jews, Muslims, and women from medical practice, since they were not able to attend a university for training and would usually not know Latin. In general, however, the laws seem only to have applied to the treatment of Christians. Jews and Muslims were left largely to their own devices, although several documents do contain recommendations that Jews be granted medical licenses. Women were forbidden to practice medicine, but there is much evidence to show that they did practice in the area for a long time. Despite attempts to force unlicensed medical personnel to cease practice, the reality of life was that there were too few doctors to serve the needs of the population. The authors' estimate that only six to seven licensed personnel existed (five if only physicians are counted) for every 10,000 inhabitants of Valencia. This number is comparable to the medical care available in the least developed portions of today's world, so it is obvious that a great demand for other healers would remain, despite royal and municipal attempts to control medical practice.

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Robert R. Edwards, *The Dream of Chaucer: Representation and Reflection in the Early Narratives*, Duke University Press, 1989, xvi, 192 pp., biblio., \$34.95.

Readers of Chaucer have long known that his early poems are cast as dream visions, while his later works offer a strong realism. In *The Dream of Chaucer*, Robert R. Edwards, chair of the Department of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo, argues that the seeds of this admirable realism lie deep in the ethereal world of the early dream visions. *The Dream of Chaucer* examines with considerable care, in the usually accepted chronological order, the *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, and the *Parliament of Fowls*. The early poems, explains Edwards, are linked together not merely by style, convention, or structure, although certainly all are there, but also by Chaucer's strong adherence to a poetically imaginative approach toward the nature of love, art, and the interpretation of experience (23). Chaucer depended on the poets and rhetoricians whom he read less for pieces and fragments to be reworked (although he did indeed rework pieces and fragments) and more for symbols of meaning. The result is a sophisticated courtly narrative,

which is a cerebral improvement over the attempts of earlier continental writers, to the point where continental writers were soon imitating Chaucer.

Although some realistic pragmatism is evident in the *Book of the Duchess* and the *House of Fame*, it is not until Chaucer reaches the *Parliament of Fowls* that the real transition to realism begins. While exploring how language itself can demonstrate meaning in the *Parliament*, Chaucer moves to a new knowledge based on realistic particulars. He rarely looks back. From this point on, Chaucer's depiction of meaning is rooted in the realistic behavior of characters and sequences of events offered by his narrators. The realism of the war-torn world of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the various problematic explanations of the Boethian answer to freedom of the will, and the mundane social intercourse of the Canterbury pilgrims all give additional meaning to Chaucer's message, to his presentation of truth. The result is a much more sophisticated Chaucer, one who has taken all he can from his predecessors and become the Chaucer of the major poems.

Edwards's conclusions will probably meet little opposition from the Chaucer community. The more we learn about the development of Chaucer's art the better. But the *Dream of Chaucer* is not an easy book, and its writing could have been more lucid. Granted that the subject is complex, that an intense critical analysis always brings its own built-in intricacies, some of Edwards's theoretical positions still might have been presented less enigmatically. That, however, is a minor problem. This book is a valuable source of good information for those with the patience to find it.

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Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, Harvard University Press, 1989, xiii, 236 pp., biblio., \$29.95.

Embracing recent critics who see Chaucer's art as "'contrastive,' 'exploratory,' a repository of 'partial truths,' 'pluralistic,' 'inconclusive,' 'plurivalent,' and 'disjunctive'" (169), Paul Strohm develops a complementary social dimension by asking: What are the social implications of a plurivalent and disjunctive art of the late fourteenth century? After examining the structure of the late fourteenth-century social relations, Chaucer's position as a courtier, his audience, and his work, Strohm offers an answer thoroughly congenial to our own times. Of the *Canterbury Tales*, for example, Strohm concludes: "The hospitality of Chaucer's 'framing fiction' to the varied styles and genres and forms in which his tellers express themselves, and to the ultimate irreconcilability of their voices,