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Review Essay: Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer*

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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,

thus enables the perpetuation of a commonwealth of 'mixed style,' with ultimately reassuring implications for the idea of the natural state as a socially heterogeneous body that recognizes the diverse interests and serves the collective good of all'' (168). Those attracted to a disjunctive and pluralistic aesthetic will find Strohm's historical and social contentions highly persuasive; those not so attracted will just as surely detect modern artistic and social theories imposed on the art and society of another time and place.

Strohm locates the source of Chaucer's social plurivalence in his experience as a courtier. During the later fourteenth century, Strohm argues, a divinely sanctioned, hierarchical order was giving way to a secular, opportunistic, and horizontal order. Most exposed to the tensions were Chaucer and his fellow courtiers, ''gentle in rank, but insecurely so; linked to the nobility, but less by sworn and eternal ties than by temporary contracts; members of a feudal retinue [but one] that actually combined elements of a political party and a precocious bureaucracy'' (xi). These tensions, especially as exacerbated by the desperate troubles of 1385 to 1388, were, Strohm implies, enough to move Chaucer from hierarchical to horizontal social perspectives, perspectives for the most part only recently articulated.

The most historical and suggestive section of *Social Chaucer* is chapter two. Here Strohm examines Chaucer's royalist associations and compares the courtiers executed by the Appellant lords with those who survived. Strohm is not alone in detecting self-protective action when Chaucer left his post at the London port, and he is doubtless correct that preferment figured in the executions. A ''persuasive pattern'' (38) based on preferment alone is not, however, enough to distinguish those executed from those who lived to thrive in the 1390s. Burley and Beauchamp held positions more sensitive than any held by the survivors, and, based on preferment alone, John Clanvowe could have been executed with more justice than John Salisbury. Nor is it necessary to find detached calculation of self-interest in Chaucer's every new association and change of post. In its suggestive treatment of the opportunities and difficulties of court service in unsettled times, however, this chapter breaks new ground.

The last chapters, based on horizontal trends in late medieval political and social thought, offer a perspective on the full body of Chaucer's work. Throughout, Strohm finds discourse communities of ''multiple, independent, and unresolved voices'' (163) favored over hierarchical structures. Thus, the *Knight's Tale* focuses on the hierarchical and providential but, given Saturn's role, reveals ''a scheme . . . anything but providential'' (138). The *Miller's Tale*, on the other hand, focuses on the horizontal and the temporal but, in the jeering clerks at the end, recognizes that purely temporal ''calculation in one's own interest . . . entails significant costs'' (139). The *Franklin's Tale* ''suggests that oaths themselves can

be a part of the problem'' (106) and that a new, more ''flexible and humane'' alternative to ''outworn social structure'' is necessary (108). The *Parson's Tale*, by contrast, attempts a refeudalization and resacralization of the ''natural and varied world,'' but unresolved voices in the preceding tales ''resist closure, denying to any one pilgrim the finality of utterance to which the voice of the Parson would aspire'' (180).

The perceived strength of these last chapters (and the book generally) will depend entirely on the reader's presuppositions about Chaucer's art. Such is the irony of social and literary perspectives on work so rich and, as *Social Chaucer* demonstrates, so susceptible to multiple readings.

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Karla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads ''The Divine Comedy,''* Stanford University Press, 1989, vi, 289 pp., biblio., index, $29.50.

The title, *Chaucer Reads ''The Divine Comedy,''* is an apt beginning for this reconsideration of Chaucer's appropriation of Dante's text. This is not a book concerned with how Dante ''influenced'' Chaucer; that has been done before. Rather, this book explores the key theoretical differences between these two major medieval poets on the subject of the authority of reading and writing: it examines their assumptions about the domain of fiction, what human language can and cannot do, how one reads and what one apprehends from language, regardless of authorial intention. The *House of Fame* and *Troilus and Creseyde* are, for Karla Taylor, Chaucer's ''critique of Dante's poem and its poetic typology'' (171), a critique that implicitly defines the limits of human language. As she argues, ''*Troilus and Creseyde* is, among other things, a sustained dialogue with Dante on the circumscription of human fictions'' (209).

Taylor introduces her argument by providing the linguistic model from which she will analyze how the two writers create ''authenticity'' (10). She presents the grammatical and verbal structures that enable the two poets to create *histoire* (objective narration) and *discours* (subjective narration). Following this clear explanation of methodology, the first chapter describes Chaucer's view of ''tidings'' and fame by considering the *House of Fame* as an ''antitypological vision of history as mere stories, recorded in literature, which, like fame, has no secure relation to truth'' (40)—the antithesis of Dante's ''vision'' in the *Divine Comedy*.

Chapters two and four demonstrate how Dante authenticates his text through figurative language, thereby legitimizing the authority and objectivity of his vision